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TABLE OF CONTENTS

DECEMBER
1956

VOLUME 7
NUMBER 6

IMAGINATION
STORIES OF SCIENCE AND FANTASY

Stories

FEBRUARY ISSUE ON SALE
NOVEMBER 27th

LAST CALL FOR DOOMSDAY!

(Complete Novel) by S. M. Tenneshaw 8
Wales knew life on Earth must end—yet to save humanity meant panic and chaos!

THE ALIEN DIES AT DAWN

(Short Story) by Alexander Blade 64
He had to stop the execution to save a thousand lives. But time was against him!

THE THING IN THE TRUCK

(Short Story) by Darius John Granger 76
Nobody would suspect a cargo of potatoes going to market. And the alien knew it!

LAIR OF THE DRAGONBIRD

(Short Story) by Robert Silverberg 88
Few people on Venus believed the creature existed. And it meant death to find out!

REVOLT OF THE BRAINS

(Short Story) by C. H. Thomas 100
Earth was prepared to fight any invader—except one mankind created for survival!

THE INQUISITOR

(Short Story) by Randall Garrett 106
Kroll knew treachery when he saw it. But it would take torture to prove the fact!

Features

THE EDITORIAL 6	✓ PANDORA'S BOX 114
UNGUIDED MISSILES 87	SCIENCE FICTION LIBRARY 122
HOW HOT IS HOT? 98	LETTERS FROM THE READERS 124
PHOTONIC AMPLIFIER 113	TOMORROW'S SCIENCE 132

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Front cover painting by Lloyd Rognan, suggested by, "Last Call For Doomsday!"
Back cover astronomical photo courtesy, Mt. Wilson & Palomar Observatories.

Published bi-monthly by Greenleaf Publishing Company, 1428 Fawlor Avenue, Evanston, Illinois. Entered as second-class matter at the Post Office at Evanston, Illinois. Additional entry at Sandusky, Ohio. Address all communications to IMAGINATION, P. O. Box 230, Evanston, Illinois. We do not accept responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts or art work; submissions must be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed return envelope. Accepted material is subject to whatever revisions are necessary to meet requirements, and will be paid for at our current rates. The names of all characters used in stories are fictitious; any resemblance to any person living or dead is coincidental. Copyright 1956 Greenleaf Publishing Company. Subscription rate \$3.00 12 issues. Advertising rates sent upon request. Printed in U.S.A. by Stephen's Printing Corp., Sandusky, Ohio.



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The Editorial

YOU'D BE SURPRISED at the number of letters *Madge* gets every issue. For that matter, we'll include our companion magazine, *Imaginative Tales*. And one of the big things we've noticed in the stack of letters is the constant request on the part of readers for personal contact with other readers. This holds true for guys and gals of all age brackets.

IT REALLY ISN'T hard to understand, either. Science fiction readers—the world over—are a warm, friendly, interested group of people. They not only like to read the stories, articles, and letters in their favorite magazines, but they enjoy exchanging ideas, and just plain getting to know others interested in the same things they are.

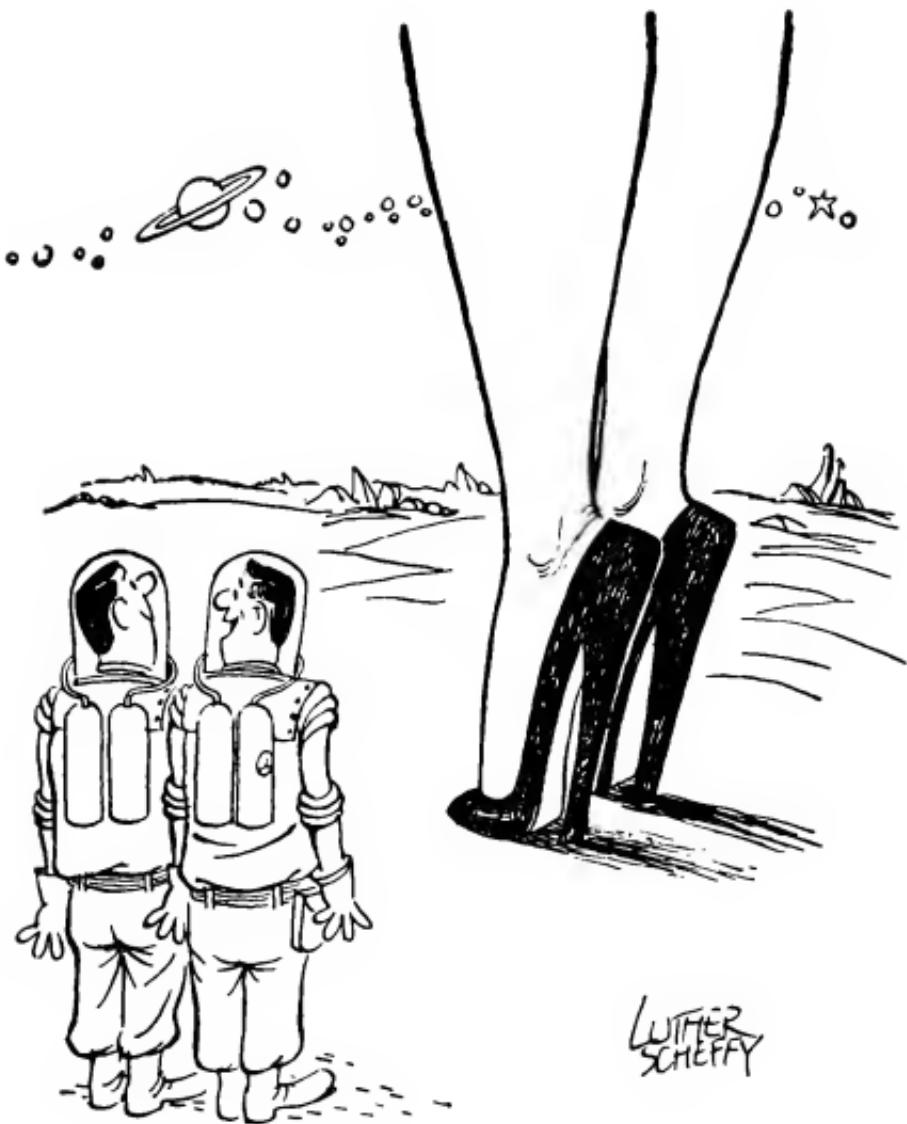
NATURALLY, space is limited in our letter section to include everyone who'd like to correspond with others. So we've come up with a neat idea. We are announcing herewith, and forming, the COSMIC PEN-CLUB. It will be a feature in all future issues of both *Madge* and *Imaginative Tales*.

THREE WILL BE no dues, no fees, no gimmicks of any kind. It will be strictly a reader's service feature, a department where everyone can express a few lines about himself -- or herself -- and

start up interesting friendships with other science fiction enthusiasts around the world. And we do mean around the world! Both of our science fiction magazines have readers in not only North & South America, but Europe, Africa, Asia, and Australia as well. So now you can all get together!

OUR PLAN is simple: Address a letter -- or postcard -- to COSMIC PEN-CLUB, % *Madge* or *Tales* at P.O. Box 230, Evanston, Ill. Include such vital statistics as name, address, age, sex, occupation, and a brief paragraph of pertinent things of interest which may guide other science fiction readers in selecting you for a pen-pal. We'll do the rest by running the information in the COSMIC PEN-CLUB section of the magazines.

IT IS UNDERSTOOD, of course, that we will not list any reader who is trying to sell any merchandise, or in any way in our opinion violating the spirit of the club. This is strictly a social service where everyone can get to know everyone else. We realize that only a few science fictioners manage to make the annual convention or regional fan gatherings, so with the COSMIC PEN-CLUB everyone will have an opportunity to make new friends. Okay, fans, first come first served! wlh



"I have a hunch we're in for a big time!"



Wales saw men around him become savage beasts, shooting, looting, killing in frantic hysteria. Men without hope, they awaited the—

Last Call For Doomsday!

by

S. M. Jenneshaw

A DEEP SHUDDER shook Jay Wales. He wished now he hadn't had to come back here to Earth this last time. He

wanted to remember the old world of man as it had been, not as it was now in its dying hour.

"It seems impossible that it will



really happen," said Hollenberg, the docket captain.

He wasn't looking at Earth. He was looking beyond it at the glittering stars.

Wales looked too. He knew where to look. He saw the faint little spark of light far across the Solar System.

A spark, a pinpoint, an insignificant ray upon the optic nerves -- that was all it was.

That -- and the hand of God reaching athwart the universe.

"It'll happen," said Wales, without turning. "September 27th, 1997. Four months from now. It'll

happen."

The rocket-ship was suddenly convulsed through all its vast fabric by the racking roar of brake-jets letting go. Both men exhaled and lay back in their recoil-chairs. The thundering and quivering soon ceased.

"People," said Hollenberg, then, "are wondering if it really will. Happen, I mean."

For the first time, Wales looked at him sharply. "People where?"

Hollenberg nodded toward the window. "On Earth. Every run we make, we hear it. They say --"

And here it was again, Wales

thought, the rumors, the whispers, that had been coming out to Mars, stronger and more insistent each week.

There in the crowded new prefab cities on Mars, where hundreds of millions of Earth-folk were already settling into their new life, with millions more supposed to arrive each month, the rumors were always the same.

"Something's wrong, back on Earth. The Evacuation isn't going right. The ships aren't on schedule - - -"

Wales hadn't worried much about it, at first. He had his own job. Fitting the arriving millions into a crowded new planet, a new, hard way of life, was work enough. He was fourth in command at Resettlement Bureau, and that meant a job that never ended.

Even when the Secretary called him in to the new UN capital on Mars, he'd only expected a beef about resettlement progress. He hadn't expected what he got.

The Secretary, an ordinarily quiet, relaxed man, had been worn thin and gray and nervous by a load bigger than any man had ever carried before. He had wasted no time at all on amenities when Wales was shown in.

"You knew Kendrick personally?"

There was no need to use first

names. Since five years before, there was only one Kendrick in the world who mattered.

"I knew him," Wales had said. "I went to school with both Lee and Martha Kendrick - - - his sister."

"Where is he?"

Wales had stared. "Back on Earth, at Westpenn Observatory. He said he'd be along soon."

The Secretary said, "He's not at the Observatory. He hasn't come to Mars yet, either. He's disappeared."

"But, why - - -?"

"I don't care *why*, Wales. I want to know *where*. Kendrick's got to be found. His disappearance is affecting the Evacuation. That's the report I get from a dozen different men back on Earth. I message them, 'Why are the rocket-schedules falling behind?' I tell them, 'It's Doomsday Minus 122, and Evacuation must go faster.' I get the answer back, 'Kendrick's disappearance responsible - - - are making every effort to find him'."

After a silence the Secretary had added, "You go back to Earth, Wales. You find Kendrick. You find out what's slowing down Evacuation. We've got to speed up, man! There's over twelve million people still left on Earth."

And here he was, Wales thought, in a rocket-ship speeding back to

Earth on one of the endless runs of the Marslift, and he still didn't know why Evacuation had slowed, or what Lee Kendrick's disappearance had to do with it, and he'd have precious little time to find out.

THEY WERE SWEEPING in a landing-pattern now, and the turquoise had become a big blue balloon fleeced with white clouds. And Hollenberg was far too busy with his landing to talk now. The rocket-captain seemed, indeed, relieved not to be questioned.

The rush inward, the roar of air outside the hull, the brake-blasts banging like the triphammers of giants, the shadowed night side of the old planet swinging up to meet them

When he stepped out onto the spaceport tarmac, Wales breathed deep of the cool night air. Earth air. There was none like it, for men. No wonder that they missed its tang, out there on Mars. No wonder old women in the crowded new cities out there still cried when they talked of Earth.

He braced back his shoulders, buttoned the tunic of his UN uniform. He wasn't here to let emotion run away with him. He had a job. He got onto one of the moving beltways and went across the

great spaceport, toward the high, gleaming cluster of lights that marked the port headquarters.

Far away across the dark plain loomed the massive black bulks of rocket-ships. Dozens of them, hundreds of them. And more were coming in, on rigid landing-schedule. The sky above, again and again, broke with thunder and the great ships came riding their brake-jets of flame downward.

Wales knew, to the last figure, how many times in the last years ships had risen from this spaceport, and how many times, having each one carried thousands of people to Mars, they had returned. Tens of millions had gone out from here. And New Jersey Spaceport was only one of the many spaceports serving the Evacuation. The mind reeled at the job that had been done, the vast number who had been taken to that other world.

And it was still going on. Under colored lights, Wales saw the long queue of men, women, children moving toward one of the towering ships nearby. Signals flashed. Loudspeakers bawled metallically.

"--- to Ship 778! All assigned to Ship 778 this way! Have your evacuation-papers ready!"

Wales went by these people, not looking at their faces, not wanting to see their faces.

The noise and crowded confusion got worse as he neared the Administration Building. Near it the buses were unloading, the endless cargoes of people, people - - - always people, always those pale faces.

An armed guard outside Administration's entrance looked at Wales' uniform and then at his credentials, and passed him through.

"Port Coordinator's office straight ahead," he said.

The interior of the building was a confusion of uniformed men, and women, of clicking tabulating machines, of ringing phones.

Wales thought that here you felt the real pulse of the Marslift. A pulse that had quickened now - - - like the pulse of a dying man.

Bourreau, the Port Coordinator, was a stocky, bald sweating man, who had thrown off his uniform jacket and was drinking coffee at his desk when Wales came in.

"Sit down," he said. "Heard you were coming. Heard the Secretary was sending you to burn our tails."

"Nothing like that," said Wales. "He just wants to know, why the devil are Evacuation schedules falling behind?"

Bourreau drained his cup, set it down, and wiped his mouth. "Listen," he said, "you don't want to talk to me."

"I don't?"

"No, I'm the Port Coordinator,

that's all. I've passed millions of people through here. Evacuation Authority sends them in here, from the marshalling point over in New York. Good people, not-so-good people, and people that aren't worth saving. But to me, they're all just units. They reach here, I shoot them out. That's all. The man you want to talk to is John Fairlie."

"The regional Evacuation Marshal?"

"Yes. Talk to him, over in New York. I've got a car and driver ready for you."

WALES STOOD UP. It was obvious that Bourreau had been all ready for him, and was not going to take a rap for anybody. It was equally obvious that he'd learn nothing about Kendrick's disappearance from this man.

"All right," he said. "I'll see Fairlie first."

The driver of the car, a UN private, turned off on a side road almost as soon as they left the spaceport.

"No use bucking all the buses and trucks on the evacuation thruways," he said. "We use the old roads when we want to hurry. No traffic on *them* now."

The old roads. The ribbons of concrete and asphalt that once had

carried thousands of cars, day and night. Now they were dark and empty.

The car went through a village. It too was dark and empty. They swung on through countryside, without a light in it. And then there was a bigger village, and its dark windows stared at them like blind eyes.

"All evacuated," said the driver. "Every village, town, farm, between here and New York was closed out two-three years ago."

Wales, sitting hunched by the open window, watching the road unreel, saw an old farmhouse on the curve ahead. The headlights caught it, and he saw that all its window-shutters were closed. Someone, some family, had left that house forever and had carefully shuttered its windows - - - against doomsday.

The poplars and willows and elms went by, and now and again there was a drifting fragrance of flowers, of blossoming orchids. Old apple-trees, innocently ignorant of world's end, were preparing to fruit once more.

Wales felt a sharp, poignant emotion. He asked himself, as a world had been asking for five years, *Why did it have to be?*

There was only one answer. Far out in the dark lonesomeness of the solar system, far beyond man's

new Martian colonies, the thousands of asteroids that swung in incredibly intricate and eccentric orbits - - - they were the answer. They had been shuttles, weaving fate's web.

Kendrick had been the first to see it, to note the one big asteroid whose next passage near Jupiter would make its eccentricity of orbit *too* great. With camera and telescope Kendrick had watched, and with the great electronic calculators he had plotted that orbit years ahead, and . . .

Wales had often wondered what Lee Kendrick had felt like when the first knowledge came to him, when the first mathematical formulae of doom came out on the calculator printing-tape. *Mene, Mene, Tekel, Upharsin*, spelled out in an equation. An electronic computer, passionately prophesying the end of man's world . . .

"In five years, the eccentricity of the asteroid Nereus will bring it finally across Earth's orbit at a point where it will collide with Earth. This collision will make our planet uninhabitable."

He well remembered the first stupefaction with which the world had received the announcement, after Kendrick's calculations had been proved beyond all doubt.

"No force available to us can destroy or swerve an asteroid so

big. But in five years, we should be able to evacuate all Earth's people to Mars."

Kendrick, Wales thought now, had been able to give Earth the years of advance warning that meant escape, the years in which the tens of thousands of great rocket-ships could be built and the Marslift get under way. If mankind survived, it would be due to Kendrick's warning. Why should he vanish now?

Wales suddenly became conscious that his driver was putting on the brakes. They were in the outskirts of Morristown.

The streets here were *not* all dark and dead. He saw the glimmer of flashlights, the movement of dark figures, and heard calling voices.

"I thought you said these cities were all closed out?" Wales said.

The driver nodded. "Yeah. But there's still people around some of them. Looters." He stopped. "We'd better detour around here."

"Looters?" Wales was astounded. "You mean, you don't stop them?"

"Listen," said the driver. "What difference does it make what they take, when the place is closed out?"

Wales had forgotten. What difference did it make, indeed? The nearly-deserted Earth was any man's property now, when inevit-

able catastrophe was rushing toward it.

A thought struck him. These folk couldn't expect to take loot with them when they were evacuated. So they didn't plan to be evacuated.

He said, "Wait here. I'm going to have a look at them."

"I wouldn't," said the driver hastily. "These people - - -"

"Just wait," said Wales crisply.

He walked away from the car, toward the flashlights and the shadows and the shouting voices.

The voices had a raw edge of excitement in them, and a few were thick with alcohol. They were mixed men and women, and a few yelping youngsters.

They weren't breaking windows. They simply used crowbars to force open doors. Many doors weren't even locked. Eager hands passed out a motley collection of objects, small appliances, liquor bottles, canned synthefood, clothing.

No wonder Evacuation was going off schedule, thought Wales! Letting people play the fool like this - - -

A flashlight beam flared beside him, a man's face peered at his uniform, and a loud voice bellowed close to his ears, "Look, everybody! It's an Evacuation Officer!"

There was a dead silence, and

then the flashlights converged on him. Somewhere in the group, a woman screamed.

"They're after us! They're going to put us on the ships and take us away!"

"Kill the bastard, knock him down!" yelled a raging voice.

Wales, too astounded to defend himself, felt a sudden shower of clumsy blows that sent him to his knees.

CHAPTER II

IT WAS THE VERY NUMBER of Wales' attackers that saved him. There were too many of them, they were too eager to get at him. As he hit the pavement, they dropped their flashlights and crowded around in the dark, getting in each other's way, like frantic dogs chivvying a small animal.

A foot trampled his shoulder and he rolled away from it. All around him in the dark were trousered legs, stumbling over him. Voices yelled, "Where is he?" They yelled, "Bring the lights!"

The lights, if they came, would mean his death. A mob, even a small mob like this one, was a mindless animal. Wales, floundering amid the dark legs, kept his head. He shouted loudly,

"Here come the Evacuation trucks - - - here they come! We'd

better beat it!"

He didn't think it would work, but it did. In that noisy, scuffling darkness, no one could tell who had shouted. And these people were already alarmed.

The legs around him shifted and stamped and ran away over the pavement. A woman screeched thinly in fear. He was alone in the dark.

He didn't think he would be left alone for long. He started to scramble to his feet, beside the curb, and his hand went into an opening - - - a long curbside storm-sewer drain.

A building was what he had had in mind, but this was better. He got down on his belly and wormed sidewise into the drain. He lay quiet, in a concrete cave smelling of old mud.

Feet came pounding back along the streets, he glimpsed beams of light angling and flickering. Angry voices yelled back and forth. "He's not here. He's got away. But there must be other goddamned Evacuation men around. They're going to round us up - - -"

"By God, nobody's going to round *me* up and take *me* to Mars!" said a deep bass voice right beside Wales.

Somebody else said, "All that nonsense about Kendrick's World - - -" and added an oath.

Wales lay still in his concrete hole, nursing his bruised shoulder. He heard them going away.

He waited, and then crawled out. In the dark street, he stood, muddy and bruised, conscious now that he was shaking.

What in the world had come over these people? At first, five years ago, it had been difficult to convince many that an errant asteroid would indeed ultimately crash into Earth. Kendrick's first announcement had been disbelieved by many.

But when all the triple-checking by the world's scientists had confirmed it, the big campaign of indoctrination that the UN put on had left few skeptics. Wales himself remembered how every medium of communication had been employed.

"Earth will not be destroyed," the UN speakers had repeated over and over. "But it *will* be made uninhabitable for a long time. The asteroid Nereus will, when it collides, generate such a heat and shock wave that nothing living can survive it. It will take many years for Earth's surface to quiet again after the catastrophe. Men - - - all men - - - must live on Mars for perhaps a whole generation."

People had believed. They had been thankful then that they had

a way of escape from the oncoming catastrophe - - - that the colonization of Mars had proceeded far enough that it could serve as a sanctuary for man, and that modern manufacture of synthetic food and water from any raw rock would make possible feeding all Earth's millions out on that arid world.

They had toiled wholeheartedly at the colossal crash program of Operation Doomsday, the building of the vast fleet of rocket-ship transports, the construction and shipping out of the materials for the great new prefab Martian cities. They had, by the tens and hundreds of millions, gone in their scheduled order to the spaceports and the silver ships that took them away.

But now, with millions still left on Earth, there was a change. Now skepticism and rebellion against Evacuation were breeding here on Earth.

It didn't, Wales thought, make sense!

He was suddenly very anxious to reach New York, to see Fairlie.

HE WENT BACK along the dark street to the main boulevard, where the little white route signs glimmered faintly. He looked for the car, but did not see it.

Shrugging, Wales started along the highway. He couldn't be too

far from the big Evacuation Thruways.

He had gone only a few blocks in the dark, when lights suddenly came on and outlined him. He whirled, startled.

"Mr. Wales," said a voice.

Wales relaxed. He walked toward the lights. It was the car, and the driver in the UN uniform, parked back in an alley.

"I thought you were back at the spaceport by now," Wales said sourly.

The driver swore. "I wasn't going to run away. But no use tackling that crowd. Didn't I warn you? An Evacuation uniform sets them crazy."

Wales got in beside him. "Let's get out of here."

As they rolled, he asked, "When I left Earth four years ago, there didn't seem a soul who doubted Doomsday. Why are these people doubtful now?"

The driver told him, "They say Kendrick's World is just a scare, that it's not going to hit Earth after all."

"Who told them that?"

"Nobody knows who started the talk. Not many believed it at first. But then people began to say, 'Kendrick was the one who predicted Doomsday -- if he really believed it, *he'd* leave Earth!'"

"What did Kendrick say to

that?"

"He didn't say anything. He just went into hiding, they say. Leastwise, the officials admitted he hadn't gone to Mars. No wonder a lot of folks began to say, 'He *knows* his prediction was wrong, that's why he's not leaving Earth!'"

Wales asked, after a time, "What do you think, yourself?"

The driver said, "*I'm* going out on Evacuation, for sure. So maybe Kendrick and the rest are wrong? What have I got to lose? And if the big crash does come, I won't be here."

Dawn grayed the sky ahead as the car rolled on through more and more silent towns. It took to a skyway and as they sped above the roofs, the old towers of New York rose misty and spectral against the brightening day.

In the downtown city itself, they were suddenly among people again. They were everywhere on the sidewalks and they were a variegated throng. Workers and their families from the midwest, lumbermen and miners from the north, overweight businessmen, women, children, babies, dogs, birds in cages, a shuffling, slow-moving mass of humanity walking aimlessly up and down the streets, waiting their call-up to the buses and the spaceports and the leaving of their world.

Evacuation Police in their gray uniforms were plentiful, and to Wales' surprise they were armed. Only official cars were in the streets, and Wales noticed the frequent unfriendly looks his own car got from faces here and there in the throngs. He didn't suppose people would be too happy about leaving Earth.

The big new UN Building, towering over the city, had been built thirty years before to replace the old one. He had supposed it would be an empty shell, now that the whole Secretariat was out on Mars. But it wasn't. Here was Evacuation headquarters for a whole part of America, and the building was jammed with officials, files, clerks.

He was expected, it seemed. He went right through to the regional Evacuation Marshal's office.

JOHN FAIRLIE was a solid, blond man of thirty-five or so, with the kind of radiant strength, health, and intelligence that always made Wales feel even more lanky and shy than he really was.

"We've been discussing your mission here," Fairlie said bluntly. He indicated the three other men in the room. "My friends and fellow-officials - - - they're assistants to Evacuation Marshals of other regions. Bliss from Pacific

Coast, Chaumez from South America, Holst from Europe - - -"

They were men about Fairlie's age, and Wales thought that they were anxious men.

"We don't resent your coming, and you'll get 100 percent cooperation from all of us," Fairlie was saying. "We just hope to God you can get Evacuation speeded up to schedule again. We're worried."

"Things are that bad?" said Wales.

Bliss said gloomily, "Bad - - - and getting worse. If it keeps up, there's going to be millions still left on Earth when Doomsday comes."

"What," asked Wales, "do you think ought to be done first?"

"Find Kendrick," said Fairlie promptly.

"You think his disappearance that important?"

"I *know* it is." Fairlie strode up and down the office, his physical energy too restless to be still. "Listen, Wales. It's the fact that Kendrick, who first predicted the catastrophe, hasn't himself left Earth that's deepening all these doubts. If we could find Kendrick and show people how he's going to Mars, it would discredit all this talk that his prediction was a mistake, and that he knows it."

"You've already tried to find him?"

Fairlie nodded. "I've had the world combed for him. I wish I could guess what happened to him. If we could only find his sister, even, it might lead to him."

Yes, Wales thought. Martha and Lee Kendrick had always been close. And now they had vanished together.

He told Fairlie what had happened to him in the Jersey City. Neither Fairlie nor the others seemed much surprised.

"Yes. Things are bad in some of the evacuated regions. You see, once we get all the listed inhabitants out, we can't go back to those places. We haven't the time to keep going over them. So others - - - the ones who don't want to go - - - can move into the empty towns and take over."

"Why don't they want to go?" Wales studied the other's face as he asked the question. "Five years ago, everyone believed in the crash, in the coming of Doomsday. Now people here are skeptical. You say that Kendrick might convince them. But what made them skeptical, in the first place?"

Fairlie said, "I don't know, not for sure. But I can tell you what I think."

"Go ahead."

"I think it's secret propaganda at work. I think Evacuation is being secretly sabotaged by talk that

Doomsday is all a hoax."

Wales was utterly shocked. "Good God, man, who would do a thing like that? Who would want millions of people to stay on Earth and die on Doomsday?"

Fairlie looked at him. "It's a horrible thought, isn't it? But fanatics will sometimes do horrible things."

"Fanatics? You mean - - - "

Fairlie said, "We've been hearing rumors of a secret organization called the Brotherhood of Atonement. A group - - - we don't know how large, probably small in numbers - - - who seem to have been crazed by the coming of Doomsday. They believe that Ne-reus is a just vengeance coming on a sinful Earth, and that Earth's sins must be atoned by the deaths of many."

"They're preaching that doctrine openly?" Wales said, incredulous.

"Not at all. Rumors is all we've heard. But - - - you wondered who would want millions of people to stay on Earth till Doomsday. That's a possible answer."

It made, to Wales, a nightmare thought. Mad minds, unhinged by the approach of world's end, cunningly spreading doubt of the oncoming catastrophe, so that millions would doubt, and would stay - - - and would atone.

BLISS SAID, "The damn fools, to believe such stuff! Well, if they get caught on Earth, it'll be the craziest, most ignorant and backward part of the population that we'll lose."

Fairlie said wearily, "Our job is not to lose anybody, to get them all off no matter who or what they are."

Then he said to Wales, with a faint smile, "Sorry if we seem to be griping too much. I expect your job on Mars hasn't been easy either. Things are pretty tough there, aren't they?"

"They're bound to be tough," said Wales. "All those hundreds of millions, and more still coming in. But we'll make out. We've got to."

"Anyway, that's not my worry," Fairlie said. "My headache is to get these stubborn, ignorant fools who don't want to go, off the Earth."

Wales thought swiftly. He said, after a time, "You're right, Kendrick is the key. I came here to find him and I've got to do it."

Fairlie said, "I hope to God you can. But I'm not optimistic. We looked everywhere. He's not at Westpenn Observatory."

"Lee and Martha and I grew up together in that western Pennsylvania town," Wales said. "Castletown."

"I know, we combed the whole

place. Nothing."

"Nevertheless, I'll start there," said Wales.

Fairlie told him, "That's all evacuated territory, you know. Closed out and empty, officially. Which means - - - dangerous."

Wales looked at him. "In that case, I'll want something else to wear than this uniform. Also I'll want a car - - - and weapons."

It was late afternoon by the time Wales got the car clear of the metropolitan area, out of the congested evacuation traffic. And it was soft spring dusk by the time he crossed the Delaware at Stroudsburg and climbed westward through the Poconos.

The roads, the towns, were empty. Here and there in villages he saw gutted stores, smashed doors and windows - - - but no people.

As the darkness came, from behind him still echoed the boom-boom of thunder, ever and again repeated, of the endless ships of the Marslift riding their columns of flame up into the sky.

By the last afterglow, well beyond Stroudsburg, he looked back and thought he saw another car top a ridge and sink swiftly down into the shadow behind him.

Wales felt a queer thrill. Was he being followed? If so, by whom? By casual looters, or by some who meant to thwart his mission? By

the society of the Atonement?

He drove on, looking back frequently, and once again he thought he glimpsed a black moving bulk, without lights, far back on the highway.

He saw only one man that night, on a bridge at Berwick. The man leaned on the rail, and there was a bottle in his hand, and he was very drunk.

He turned a wild white face to Wales' headlights, and shook the bottle, and shouted hoarsely. Only the words, " - - - Kendrick's World - - - " were distinguishable.

Sick at heart, Wales went by him and drove on.

CHAPTER III

ALL THAT NIGHT, his car rolled across an unlighted, empty world. Wary of the great thruways, he followed the lesser roads. And every village, every town, every hillside or valley farm, was dark and silent. All this area that included Pennsylvania had been evacuated two years ago, and the people of these houses were now living the new life in the sprawling new cities on another planet.

Twice Wales stopped his car and cut the motor and lights, and waited, listening. Once he was sure that he heard a distant hum-ming from far back along the high-

way, but it fell silent, and though he waited with gun in hand, no one came. So each time he drove on, but he could not rid himself of the conviction that someone followed him secretly.

With morning, his spirits lifted a little. He was only an hour's drive from the old Pennsylvania-Ohio line where the town of Castletown was. And there, if anywhere, he must find the trail to Lee and Martha Kendrick.

Kendrick, to the world, had become identified with the asteroid that was plunging ever nearer in its fateful orbit. It had, from the first, been called Kendrick's World. Kendrick, if anyone could, might convince those who had begun to doubt Doomsday. If Kendrick could be found

Wales drove down a winding hillside road into the town of Butler, ten minutes later - - - and ran smack into a barricade.

The moment he saw the cars drawn up to block the highway, he tried to swing around fast. But he wasn't quick enough.

A voice said, "Kill the motor and get out."

Men had come out of the bushes that, in two years, had grown up close to the highway. They were unshaven men, wearing dirty jeans, with rifles in their hands. There were two on one side of the high-

way, and an older man on the other.

Wales looked at their dusty faces. Then he cut the motor and got out of the car.

They took his weapons, and the older man said, "You can put your hands down now. And come along with us."

"Where?"

"You'll see."

One man remained, searching Wales' car. The other two, their rifles on the ready, walked beside Wales down the long winding hill highway into the old town.

"I thought all these towns were evacuated," said Wales.

"They were, a long time ago," said the older man.

"But you men - - -"

"We're not from here. Now anything more you want to know, you ask Sam Lanterman. He'll have some things to ask *you*."

The main street of the town looked to Wales vaguely like a gypsy camp. Dusty cars were parked double along it, and there was a surprising number of men and women and kids about. The men all carried rifles or wore belted pistols. The children were pawing around in already-looted stores, and most of the women looked with a blank, tired stare at Wales and his guard.

They took him into the stone

courthouse. In the courtroom, dimly lighted and smelling of dust and old oak, four men were seated around what had once been a press-table. One of Wales' captors spoke to the man at the head of the table.

"Got a prisoner, Sam," he said importantly. "This fellow. He was driving from the east."

"From the east, was he?" said Lanterman. "Well, now, he might just have come from the south and swung around town, mightn't he?"

He looked keenly at Wales. He was a gangling man of forty with a red face and slightly bulging blue eyes that had a certain fierceness in them. The others at the table were two heavy men who looked like farmers, and a small, dark, vicious-looking young man.

"You didn't," said Lanterman, "just happen to come from Pittsburgh, did you?" They all seemed to watch him with a certain tenseness, at this.

Wales shook his head. "I came from the east, all the way across state."

"And where were you heading?"

WALES DIDN'T LIKE the implications of that "were". He said, "To Castletown. I'm looking for my girl. It's where she used to live."

"People in Castletown been gone two years," Lanterman said promptly. "To Mars --- the damn fools!" And he suddenly laughed uproariously.

More and more worried, Wales said, "She wrote me she wasn't going to leave till I came."

"You're not one of those Evacuation Officials, are you?" Lanterman asked shrewdly.

"A lot more likely he comes from Pittsburgh," said the dark young man.

Wales, sensing an increasing suspicion and danger, thought his safest bet was honest indignation. He said loudly,

"Look, I don't know what right you have to stop me when I'm trying to reach my girl! I'm not an Evac official and I don't know what all this talk about Pittsburgh means. Who made you the law around here?"

"Son," said Lanterman softly, "there isn't any law any more. The law left here when all the people left --- all except a few who wouldn't be stampeded off Earth by a lot of moonshiny science nonsense."

Wales said, as though himself dubious, "Then you don't think there's really going to be Doomsday, like they say?"

"Do you think so?"

Wales pretended perplexity. "I

don't know. All the big people, the Government people and all, have told us over and over on the teevee, about how Kendrick's World will hit the Earth ---"

"Kendrick's so-and-so," said one of the farmer-looking men, disgustedly.

"I thought," said Wales, "that I'd see if my girl was going to leave, before I decided."

He wondered if he weren't laying on the stupid yokel a little too thick. But he had realized his danger from the first.

All the bands of non-evacuees who remained in closed-out territory, making their own law, were dangerous. He'd found that out in Morristown only last night. And Lanterman and his men seemed especially suspicious, for some reason.

"Look," said Lanterman, and then asked, "What's your name, anyway?"

"Jay Wilson," said Wales. His name *had* been in the news, and he'd better take no chances.

"Well, look now, Wilson," said Lanterman, "you don't always want to believe what people tell you. Me, I'm from West Virginia. Had a farm there. On the TV it told us how this Kendrick had found out Earth was going to be destroyed, how, everyone would have to go to Mars. My woman said, 'Sam, we'll

have to go.' I said, 'Don't you get in a panic. People have always been predicting the end of the world. We'll wait a while and see.' Lot of our neighbors packed up and went off. People came to tell us we'd better get going too. I told them, I don't panic easy, I'm waiting a while."

Lanterman laughed. "Good thing I did. More'n a year went by, and the world didn't end. And then it turned out that this here Kendrick that started the whole stampede - - - *he* hadn't left Earth. Not him! Got all the fools flying out to Mars on his say-so, but wasn't fool enough to go himself. Fact is, people say he's hiding out so the Evacuation officials can't make him go. Well, if Kendrick himself won't go, that predicted it all, why should *we* go?"

And that, Wales thought despairingly, was the very crux of the problem. Where was Lee Kendrick anyway? He must know that his remaining on Earth was being fatally misinterpreted by people like these.

Lanterman added, with a certain complacency, "All the fools went, and left their houses, cars, cities. Left 'em to those of us who wasn't fools! That's why we gathered together. Figured we might as well pick up what they'd left. We got near a hundred men together, I

said, 'Boys, let's quit picking over these empty villages and take a real rich town. Let's go up to Pittsburgh.' "

One of the farmer-men said gloomily, "Only this Bauder had the idea first. *His* bunch took over Pittsburgh, as we found out."

Lanterman's eyes flashed. "But they're not going to keep it! Since we first tried it, we've got a lot more men. One or two joining us every few days. We'll show Bauder's outfit something this time!"

Of a sudden, the strangeness of the scene struck at Wales. A few years before, this quiet old country courthouse had been the center of a busy, populous town, of a county, a nation, a world.

Now world and nation were drained of most of their people. An Earth almost de-populated lay quiet, awaiting the coming of the destruction from space. Yet men who did not believe in that destruction, men in little bands, were, with the passing of all law, contending for the possession of the great evacuated cities.

Lanterman stood up. "Well, what about it, Wilson? You want to join up with us and take Pittsburgh away from Bauder? Man, the loot there'll be - - - liquor, cars, food, everything!"

WALES KNEW he had no real choice, that even though

it was a maddening interruption to his search for Kendrick, he must pretend to accede. But he thought it best not to agree too readily.

"About Pittsburgh, I don't care," he said. "It's Castletown I want to get to - - - and my girl."

"Ho," said Lanterman, "I'll tell you what. You join up with us and I'll give you Castletown, all for your own. Of course, I'll still be boss of the whole region."

Wales made another attempt for information. "I've heard of this Brotherhood of Atonement," he said. "Are you with that outfit?"

Lanterman swore. "That bunch is *crazy*. No sense to 'em at all. Hell, no, we're not Atoners."

Wales said, slowly, "Well, looks like if I and my girl decide to stay, we'd better be in your bunch. Sure, I'll join."

Lanterman clapped him on the back. "You'll never regret it, Wilson. I've got some big ideas. Those that stick with me will get more'n their share of everything. Pittsburgh is only the start."

He added impressively, "You're joining at a lucky time. For tonight's when we're taking Pittsburgh."

The young, dark man snarled, "If he's a spy, then letting him know that will - - -"

"You're too suspicious, Harry," said Lanterman. "He's no spy. He's

just a good boy, trying to get to his girl. He'll help us, and we'll help him. Fact, I'll take him along personal with me."

Wales had no illusions. He was still on probation with this bunch, and would be watched. He'd have to get away from them as soon as he could, and get on to Castletown on his search, but if he was too premature about it, he'd get a bullet.

During the rest of the day, he found himself never out of sight of Lanterman or Harry or one of the others. He ate with them, in the dusty dining-room of the town hotel. There was a waste and profusion of packaged synthefoods that bespoke the abundance of a world left for the looting.

Before dusk, all the men gathered in the main street, armed with rifles and Venn tommy-guns. The women, and the awed children, watched from the doors and windows along the street.

Lanterman, his red face gleaming in the sunset, and with two heavy pistols belted around him, spoke to the men, his voice echoing loudly along the silent street.

"We're going down and take Pittsburgh away from Bauder and then we'll have a decent place for us and our families to live," he said. "Lots of food, guns, everything - - - enough for years to

come."

He looked down at the dark young man. "All right, Harry, you take your bunch along now. And you remember not to start things till you hear our signal."

Ten cars, with thirty-odd men in them, pulled out of the main street in the twilight. Harry was in the first car, and they headed south out of town.

Lanterman then told the others, "Rest of us better get going too, all except those that are staying to guard the women and kids. You stick along with me, Wilson."

Motors roared, all along the street. Lanterman climbed grandly into a long black limousine, and Wales followed him.

The car was full of men and gun-barrels when its driver, a leathery young chap who was chewing tobacco, pulled out along the street. The other cars, nearly a score of them, followed them. But they headed southeastward.

"We're going pretty far east," Wales protested. "Pittsburgh's south."

Lanterman chuckled. "Don't you worry, Wilson. You'll get to Pittsburgh, before the night's over."

For an hour the caravan of cars, without lights, rolled along silent roads and through dark villages.

They came to a halt in a little town that Wales couldn't recognize.

But when he saw wooden piers, and the broad, glinting blackness of a river, he realized it must be one of the smaller towns a bit upriver from Pittsburgh on the Allegheny.

There were a dozen big skiffs tied to the piers, and a quartet of armed men guarding them. There were no lights, and the darkness was a confusion of shadowy men and of unfamiliar voices.

"Get your damned gun-butt out of my ribs, will you?"

WALES REALIZED that the whole party was embarking in the boats. He followed Lanterman into one of them. Lanterman said,

"Now I don't want one bit of noise from any of you. Get going."

The boats were cast off and forged out into the dark, wide river. In the moonless night, the shore was only a deeper bulk of blackness. Lanterman's boat, leading, swung across to the southern shore, and then kept close to it as they went silently downstream.

Occasional creak of oars, the voices of frogs along the bank --- these were the only sounds. The deep summery, rotten smell of the river brought a powerful nostalgia to Wales.

Impossible to think that all this must soon end!

The darkness remained absolute

as they went on downriver. They had entered what was once the busiest industrial region of the world, but it was desolate and black and silent now.

Wales ventured to whisper, "Why this way, instead of using the bridges?"

Lanterman snorted. "They *expect* us to use the bridges. Wait, and you'll see." A moment later he called. "No more rowing. Drift. And no noise!"

They drifted silently along the bank. A huge span loomed up vaguely over them. Wales thought it would be the old Chestnut Street Bridge.

He was startled when, beside him, Lanterman hooted. It was a reasonably good imitation of a screech-owl, twice repeated.

A moment later, from the northern, farthest end of the big bridge, rifle-shots shattered the silence. There was a sudden confusion of firing and shouting there.

Lanterman chuckled. "Harry's right on time. He'll make enough row to bring the whole bunch there."

Presently there was a sound of motors. Cars without lights, many of them, were racing along the riverside highway from downtown Pittsburgh. They rushed over the bridge, toward the distant uproar of shooting.

"That decoyed them out," Lanterman said. He gave orders, quick and fierce. "Allerman, you and Jim take your boats in here. Block the bridges, so they can't get back in a hurry."

Two skiffloads of men darted toward the dim shore. And the rest, with Lanterman's skiff leading, moved under oars down along the riverside.

Now Wales glimpsed lights - - - a few dim, scattered gleams. With a shock, he saw big, black towers against the stars, and realized they were the skyscrapers of downtown Pittsburgh.

Their skiffs shot in, bumped and stopped. The men piled out, onto a cobbled levee that slanted up from the river.

Lanterman's voice rang out. "We've got 'em cold, with most of their men chasing Harry across the river! Come on! But remember - - - don't shoot anyone unless they show fight! Most of 'em'll join us, later."

The dark figures of the men, gun-barrels glinting in the starlight, went up the levee in a stumbling rush. Somewhere ahead, a voice yelled in alarm.

Wales, behind Lanterman, felt more than ever caught in a nightmare. These men, ignorant in their disbelief, battling for an empty city upon a world toward which

doom was coming - - - it seemed a terrible dream from which he could not wake.

CHAPTER IV

THEY RAN FORWARD and were suddenly in a narrow street of tall, old business buildings. It was a gut of darkness in which the men stumbled and jostled each other, and now they heard an alarm-siren ahead.

Wales had no desire at all to become embroiled in this senseless struggle for an empty city. But with Lanterman just ahead, and men all around, he dared not try to slip away. Some of them were surely watching him.

They debouched into a broader street. A few blocks away along this wider avenue, a searchlight suddenly went into action, lighting up shop windows and building-fronts for a quartet-mile, and half-dazzling the dark, running figures of Lanterman's men. Instantly shots burst forth from beyond the searchlight. Bullets whined and whanged off stone-work, and there was the silvery crash of shattered plate-glass.

"Get back in here!" Lanterman yelled, and his men sucked back into the dark shelter of the narrower way.

One of them was holding his

shoulder, and sobbing, "Damn them, they hit me - - -"

Wales, pressing close against a stone facade, looked out into the eerie brilliance ahead and recognized it as Liberty Avenue. He saw, across it, a shopwindow in which impeccably dressed dummies looked out as though in wide-eyed amazement at what was going on.

Lanterman paid no attention to the wounded man. "They're up in that big hotel near the Post Office," he said quickly. "Can't be many men left here - - - but we got to get to them fast, before the others hear and start back."

He told one of the farmer-men, "You, Milton - - - take a dozen men and get around to the back of that hotel. Rest of us will take it from the front."

Wales thought that however ignorant he might be in some ways, Lanterman was a born leader. No wonder that people who had been bewildered and lost in doubts followed the red-faced man.

Two men with Venn-guns hurried into a building at the corner of Liberty. A minute later, from a third-floor window, they suddenly let go. The searchlight went out.

"Come on!" yelled Lanterman. They poured out into the wide avenue and raced along it, keeping on the sidewalks on either side.

There was, suddenly, a burst of

firing from ahead, that sounded muffled and distant. Then silence. They were nearly to the big hotel.

"Hold it, Sam!" came Milton's yell from the dark building. "It's all done."

Flashlights began to come on, like fireflies waking. There was a sound of women screeching from inside the hotel. Men came out of it, their hands high.

One was a burly, shock-haired man who cursed Lanterman when he saw him. "Shot two of my men, you - - - -"

"Now quiet down, Bauder," said Lanterman. In the angling flashlight illumination, his face was sweating and exultant. "No call for any more fighting here. Wouldn't have been any, if you hadn't been so big-feelinged when we first came. Pittsburgh's big enough for all of us - - long as you know I'm boss."

He turned to his men. "Half of you get back over to those bridges - - - tell 'em we've got Bauder and we've got Pittsburgh. They'll give up. Take them, Milton."

Whooping with triumph, the men started after Milton, into one of the dark side streets leading toward the river.

Wales started along with them. He half expected Lanterman to call him back, but the leader was too occupied with his moment of victory to remember the suspicions

of hours before.

It was, Wales knew, the best chance he'd be likely to get to escape from this band. He let himself drop behind the rest of Milton's men as they ran down Ninth Street. Then, passing the mouth of an alley, he dodged into it and ran alone in darkness, cutting south to Sixth.

Wales stretched his legs toward the levee. The bridges were impassable to him, and the skiffs were his only chance. He made sure of oars in one of them, then pushed it out onto the dark river.

From northward, from the bridges, came the sound of firing. But as Wales rowed, the shots straggled into silence.

He guessed that the fighting was over and that Sam Lanterman was master of Pittsburgh.

When Wales finally stood on the dark northern shore and looked back, he saw a scattered twinkling of little lights moving amid the towering black structures that once had been a city.

He suddenly found that he was shaking, from reaction and despair.

"Can anyone - - - *anything* - - - save people like that?"

To Wales, it suddenly all seemed hopeless - - - the mission on which he'd come back to Earth. Hopeless, to think that the ignorant, the short-sighted, the fearful, could

ever be induced to leave Earth in time.

HE LOOKED UP at the star-decked sky. Out there in the void, the massive asteroid that spelled world's end was swinging ever forward on the orbit that in four months would end in planetary collision. You couldn't see it, though. And that was the trouble. People like these, influenced by someone's secret propaganda, wouldn't believe it until Kendrick's World loomed dreadful in the heavens. And then it would be too late

Wales turned and started up the street from the river. He'd been given a mission and he had to carry it out. Not only for the sake of all those ignorant ones who might be trapped on a doomed world, but also for the sake of his friends. Something had happened to Lee and Martha Kendrick, and he had to find them.

He went through the Northside district until, beyond the old Planetarium, he found a big garage. There were plenty of cars in it. In ten minutes, Wales was driving north.

He kept his lights off, and his speed down. He looked back often. No one followed him now.

"Whoever *was* trailing me," he thought, "will be a while discover-

ing that I'm not still with Lanterman."

Again, he wondered who the secret trailers were. They hadn't tried to overtake him. They had just followed him. Was it someone who *also* wanted to find Kendrick? And for what reason?

He thought of the Brotherhood of Atonement that was still only a name to him, and felt a chill.

It was fifty miles to Castletown, and he dared not drive too fast without lights lest he run suddenly upon a block in the road. But after a while the moon rose and Wales was able to push the car a little faster.

The countryside dreamed in the moonlight. It was only in towns that the awful emptiness of the world crushed you down. Out here between fields and hills, things were as they had always been, and it did indeed seem mad folly for men to quit their planet. It was small wonder that some of them refused to do so.

Everything you saw, Wales thought, wrung your heart with a feeling of futility. That little white house with the picket fence that he swept past so swiftly - - - someone had labored hard to build that fence, to plant the flowers, to coddle a green lawn into being. And it had all been for nothing, the little houses, the mighty cities, all the

care and toil and planning of centuries for nothing

He would not let himself get into that frame of mind. It had not been for nothing. Out of it all, man had won for himself the knowledge that was now saving him. The cities that now seemed so futile had built the rocket fleets that for years had been taking the millions out to Mars. They had built the atomic power-plants, the great electronic food-and-water synthesizers, that would make life on Mars possible for all Earth's folk. No, man's past was not a failure, but a success.

Of a sudden, Wales' brooding was shattered as he drove into the town of Brighton Falls.

There was no town.

He pulled up, startled. In the moonlight, a blackened devastation stretched around him, a few ruined walls still standing, the rest a shapless mass of blackened debris.

Wales, after a moment, got over his first shock. "Lightning could easily start a fire," he thought. "And with nobody to put it out"

It seemed logical enough. Yet he still felt shocked as he drove hastily on out of the blackened ruins.

As the moon rose, he drove faster. Castletown was very near.

He would soon know if he had come all this way for nothing.

In this old town, Wales had grown up with Lee and Martha Kendrick. In Westpenn College here, they'd been classmates. Lee, making astronomy his career, had stayed here at the small but famous Westpenn Observatory, to make finally the astronomical discovery of approaching Doomsday. And, Wales knew, Martha had stayed with him, keeping the old Kendrick house for him.

He knew too that the Kendricks had stayed on here, even after the whole region was evacuated. And then they'd disappeared.

Fairlie had said that his men had searched here and hadn't found them. But Wales clung to the conviction that his quest of them must begin here.

CASTLETOWN *A Good Place to Live*

THE SIGN at the edge of town, unintentionally ironic now, went past him. It had been a long way from here, Wales thought, to the Rocket Service school out west, a long way farther to Mars, and yet here he was, after all these years, back again.

His own boyhood home was here but there was no reason at all to visit it. He was glad there was no reason, he was glad now that his

parents had died before Doomsday came.

He turned off the highway. The campus of Westpenn College was on the hills east of Castletown. The buildings were dark and silent. On the loftiest eminence, the dome of the Observatory shouldered the stars. There was no light there, either.

Wales drove past the campus to the big, square, old-fashioned Kendrick house. It was dark and quiet as everything else. He stopped his car, made sure of the pistol in his jacket pocket, and ascended the steps.

He felt, after all these years, like a ghost coming back to a dead town, to a dead world. Impatient of fancies, he pushed at the front door and it swung quietly inward.

Wales flashed his light around the hall inside. Then he began going through the rooms.

Over an hour later he was back in the front hall, disappointed and baffled. He had found no one in the house, and no evidence that either Lee or Martha had been here recently.

As he stood, anxious and frustrated, Wales suddenly noticed a smear of red on the inner side of the white-painted front door.

He flashed his light on it. Two words were written in lipstick on the door, in a feminine hand. "The

Castle." Nothing more.

Wales' thoughts leaped. He pulled open the door and went out to his car fast. In a moment he was driving on downtown, his hopes suddenly high.

"The Castle." That was what, when they were all kids, they had called the old hilltop mansion of an ancient great-aunt of the Kendricks'. They had given it that name because of its 1900-ish wooden tower with a crenellated top, that had fascinated them.

Of a sudden, checking his elation, there came to Wales the sure knowledge that Martha had been *afraid*, when she wrote that direction.

Afraid to leave a more definite clue, than that one that only a few people could possibly understand.

"But she didn't leave that for me - - -" Wales thought, puzzledly. "As far as they knew, I was still on Mars. But then, for whom?"

He began to worry more deeply than before. He had found a clue to the Kendricks, a clue that Fairlie's agents had been unable to understand, but the careful obscurity of it made their disappearance suddenly more sinister.

Wales drove fast through the familiar old hometown streets. He noticed, as he swung around the Diamond, that one store had a

brave sign chalked on its window, "Closed for Doomsday".

He swung right, up North Jefferson Street, then on up the steep hill that was the highest point of Castletown. He was wire-tense with hope when he parked in front of the old wooden monstrosity of a mansion.

Everything was dark here, too. His hopes fell a little as he went up the tree-lined walk. Still, people would be careful about showing light-----

Something exploded in the back of Wales' head, and his face hit the ground hard.

CHAPTER V

WALES REGAINED a foggy consciousness, to become aware that someone close to him was sobbing.

He felt that he had to get up. There was something he must do. He had very little time, the end of Earth was rushing upon him, and there was someone he must find. He *must* move, get up

"Jay," said a voice somewhere. "It's me. *Me!* Martha."

Wales got his eyes open, and saw a dark figure bending over him, and he threshed his arms numbly, trying to push it away, trying to get up, to fight.

"Jay!"

A flashlight beam suddenly sprang into being right above him, almost dazzling him. Then, his vision clearing, he saw that the beam was not on his face but on the face that bent above him.

A girl's face, quite familiar, framed by dark hair, but with tears running down it. Martha Kendrick's face.

The beam went out and the darkness was upon them again.

Wales found he was lying on damp grass, one hand resting on a concrete walk. He saw trees and a big house with a crenellated wooden tower, against the stars.

"Martha," he muttered. "So you were here. But there's someone else . . . someone slugged me"

Her voice came uncertainly. "That was me, Jay. I . . . I might have killed you"

He didn't understand at all. But, as his brain began to clear a little, he became aware of a pounding headache.

He sat up. Martha had her arm around his shoulders, but she seemed more to cling to him than to support him. She was sobbing again.

"How could I *know?*" she was saying. "I didn't even know you were on Earth. When your car came, when you came up the walk in the dark, I knew it wasn't Lee. Not tall enough. I thought it was

one of them. I didn't dare shoot, so I used the gun to hit you - - - "

He gripped her arm. "Martha, where is Lee?"

"Jay, I don't know. I've been waiting for him here, hoping he'd come. I've been nearly crazy, by myself. And afraid - - - "

Wales perceived that she was near hysteria. And her fear communicated to him.

He got unsteadily to his feet. "We'd better go inside. Where we can talk, and have a light, without anyone seeing it."

His head felt big as a pumpkin, but he navigated the steps of the old mansion successfully. In the dark interior of the house, he heard Martha lock and chain the door. Then her hand gripped his wrist.

"This way. I have one room blacked out - - - the kitchen."

He let her lead him through the darkness, heard her close another door. Then her flashlight came on again, illuminating the barny old kitchen.

He looked at her. He had remembered Martha Kendrick as a small, dark girl, something of a spitfire. There was no chip on her shoulder now. She looked near collapse, her face dead white, her hands trembling.

She insisted on putting cold wet cloths on his head. Holding them

there, feeling at the same time painful and a little ridiculous in appearance, Wales made her sit down with him at the kitchen table. The flashlight, lying on the table, threw angular shadows against the walls.

"How long have you been hiding here, Martha?"

"Five weeks. It seems like five years." Her lips began to quiver. "It's been like a terrible dream. This old house, the town, everything you knew all your life, deserted and strange. The little sounds you hear at night, the glow in the sky from the burnings - - - "

"But *why* have you hidden here? Why didn't you - - - and Lee too - - - report to New York for evacuation to Mars, like everyone else?"

Martha Kendrick seemed to get a little control of herself. She spoke earnestly.

"When Castletown, like the rest of this whole region, was evacuated two years ago, Lee wanted to stay on a while. He was working each night over at the Observatory, keeping a constant watch on Nereus. I think he kept hoping that he'd discover some change in its orbit, some hope. But - - - he found nothing. He'd been right. It would hit Earth."

"But why did *you* stay, too?" Wales demanded. Martha looked at him in surprise.

"Somebody had to take care of Lee. I wasn't going to Mars until he went. It was lonesome, after everybody left Castletown. Lee said we'd soon go, ourselves. But then - - - he changed. He began to seem terribly worried about something, terribly afraid."

"We've all been afraid," Wales said somberly, but she shook her head.

"It wasn't the crash, it wasn't Doomsday, Lee was afraid of. It was something else. He said he feared all Earth's people weren't going to get away. He said there were men who didn't *want* everyone to get away, men who wanted to see a lot of people trapped here when Doomsday comes!"

WALES WAS ELECTRIFIED out of his headache grogginess by her statement. He grasped her wrist. "Martha, Lee said that? Who did he say they were - - - those who wanted to trap millions into staying here?"

Again she shook her head. "He didn't say who they were. He said he wasn't sure, it was only a suspicion. But it worried him. He went to New York once to see John Fairlie about - - - the regional Evacuation Marshal."

Wales thought hard. "Yes. Fairlie told me *he* suspected some deliberate, secret effort going on to

induce millions of people to stay on Earth till it was too late. Either Fairlie got that idea from Lee, or Lee got it from him - - -" He broke off, then asked, "Did Lee ever talk about the Brotherhood of Atonement?"

Martha nodded. "Oh, yes, quite often. We've been afraid of them, ever since everyone else left Castletown."

Again, Wales was astonished. "What do you know about that Brotherhood, Martha?"

She seemed surprised by his excitement. "Why, Jay, they're fanatics, a superstitious movement that started long before evacuation was carried out here. People whose minds became unhinged by the coming of Doomsday. They preached, down in the Diamond, I heard them, terrible ravings that Doomsday was sent us for our sins, that only sacrifice and atonement of lives and treasures would save the world. Then, when evacuation went on, here, all the Brotherhood hid in the country so they wouldn't have to go."

"And they're here now?" he exclaimed.

Martha shuddered. "Not *here*. It's the one thing I've feared most these last weeks, that they'd burn Castletown."

"Burn Castletown? Good God - - - why?"

Martha looked at him. "Jay, they're burning the empty cities, one by one. A sacrifice. An atonement. I'm afraid Sharon was burned two nights ago - - - the glow in the sky seemed to come from there. And I've seen other fire-glowes in the south - - - "

Wales, with a sudden cold feeling, remembered the blackened desolation of Brighton Falls. Then it had been no accident? Then it had been deliberate, a purposeful thing, a sacrifice - - -

He suddenly saw Earth as it was. A nearly-empty planet reeling toward crazy anarchy. In New York, where there was still law and order and you could see the rocket-fleets of the Marslift coming and going methodically in the sky, it had still seemed like a civilized world. But out here in the black, blind evacuated regions was deepening chaos, with law gone and all the most atavistic passions of humanity let loose. With the ignorant and mad who refused to leave battling for the possession of deserted cities, or setting the torch to unpeopled towns in superstitious sacrifice

He asked Martha, "Did Lee think that the Brotherhood of Atonement was behind the plot to trap people into staying on Earth?"

That seemed to startle her. "He didn't say so. But could they be

the ones? Mad people like that - - - ?"

"It would take a fanatic to perpetrate a horror like getting people trapped in Doomsday," Wales said. "But let it pass, for the moment. I want to know what *happened* to Lee."

Her dark eyes filled with tears again. "I can't tell you. It was like this. Each night, Lee went to the Observatory. I stayed in our home but I had a portable radio-phone and he had one, always open, so I could call him if I needed him. But, one night five weeks ago, he called *me*. He was shouting, hoarse. He said, 'Martha, men breaking in - - - I think they know I suspect their plan - - - you get out of the house, quick! If I get away, I'll find you - - - '"

Her face was white and haunted, as she went on. "Jay, I didn't know what to do! I had to hide but I had to leave some word for Lee so, if he got back, he'd know where to find me. That's why I wrote "The Castle" on the door. Nobody but he would know I meant this old house. I ran out and was only a few blocks away when I heard cars, at our house, and men calling. I kept in the back streets, in the dark, and got here. I - - - I've been waiting here since then. Weeks. Eternities. And - - - Lee hasn't come. Do you think they

killed him?"

Wales gave her an honest answer. "Martha, I don't know. We'll hope they didn't. We'll try to find him. And the first question is, Who took him? Who are 'they'?"

She spoke more slowly. "I've had time to think. Lots of it. When Lee said, 'I think they know I suspect their plan - - - ' Was he referring to his suspicion that there was a terrible plot to keep many people trapped on Earth till Doomsday? Did they realize Lee suspected them, and seize him?"

Wales' fist clenched slowly. "It's the only possible answer. Lee somehow suspected who was behind the secret propaganda that's been swaying people to remain on Earth. They grabbed him, to prevent him from telling."

He added, suddenly, "And it would serve their purpose another way! It would enable them to point out that Lee Kendrick hadn't left Earth - - - so that Kendrick's World must be a hoax!"

An expression of pain crossed Martha's white face. "Jay, don't call it that."

"What?"

"Kendrick's World. It's not fair. Lee discovered its new orbit, he gave the whole Earth a lifesaving warning. It's not fair to give his name to the thing that's bringing Doomsday."

HE REACHED OUT and clasped her hand. "Sorry, Martha. You're right. But we still have that question to answer. Who are 'they' - - - the 'they' who took Lee? Are they the Brotherhood of Atonement? Or somebody else? Who else would have any motive?"

His head suddenly swayed drunkenly, and he brushed his hand across his eyes. Martha uttered a little cry of distress.

"Jay, you're still not over it - - - the blow I gave you. Here, let me make fresh compresses."

He held her back. "No, Martha, it's not that. I'm just out, dead tired. Since I reached Earth on this mission, I've had it - - - and only a few hours sleep in my car, last night."

She took his wrist. "Then you're going to sleep right now. I'll keep watch. This way - - - I have to put the light out when we leave the kitchen - - - "

Wales, following her through the dark house, felt that he was three parts asleep by the time he reached the bedroom to which she led him. His head still ached, and the headache and the exhaustion came up over him like a drowning wave.

When he woke, afternoon sunlight was slanting into the dusty bedroom. He turned, and discovered that Martha sat in a chair beside the bed, her hands folded, looking

at him.

She said, "I wasn't sleepy. And it's been so long since I've had anyone - - - "

She stopped, faintly embarrassed. Wales sat up, and reached and kissed her. She clung to him, for a moment.

Then she drew back. "Just propinquity," she said. "You would never even look at me, in the old days."

Wales grinned. "But now you're the last girl in town."

Martha's face changed and she suddenly said, with a little rush of words. "Oh, Jay, do you sometimes get the feeling that it just *can't* happen, no matter what Lee and all the other scientists say, no matter what their instruments say, that everything we've known all our lives just *can't* end in flame and shock from the sky - - - ?"

He nodded soberly. "I've had that feeling. We've all had it, had to fight against it. It's that feeling, in the ignorant, that'll keep them here on Earth until it's too late - - - unless we convince them in time."

"What'll it really be like for us, on Mars?" she asked him. "I don't mean all the cheery government talks about the splendid new life we'll all have there. I mean, *really*."

"Hard," he said. "It's going to

be a hard life, for us all. The mineral resources there are limitless. Out of them, with our new sciences of synthesis, we can make air, water, food. But only certain areas are really habitable. Our new cities out there are already badly crowded - - - and more millions still pouring in."

He still held her hand, as he said, "But we'll make out. And Earth won't be completely destroyed, remember. Someday years from now - - - we'll be coming back."

"But it won't be the same, it'll never be the same," she whispered.

He had no answer for that.

Packaged food made them a meal, in the kitchen. It was nearly sunset, by the time they finished.

Martha asked him then, with desperate eagerness, "We're going to try to find Lee now?"

Wales said, "I've been thinking. We'll get nowhere by just searching blindly. Fairlie's agents did that, and found no trace of Lee at all. I think there's only one way to find him."

"What?"

"Since I left New York on this mission, I was followed," Wales told her. He described the shadowy, unseen trailers who had tracked him until he fell into the hands of Lanterman's men. "Now, my mission to find Lee could well have

been known. Only reason anyone would follow me is to make sure I *didn't* find him. So those who tracked me must be some of the 'they' who took Lee. The Brotherhood of Atonement, it seems sure."

He paused, then went on. "So my shadows must know what happened to Lee, where he is. If I could catch one of them, make him talk - - - "

"We could find out what they've done with Lee!" Martha exclaimed. Then her excitement checked. "But you said they must have lost your trail, at Pittsburgh."

He nodded. "Sure. But what would they do, when they made sure I wasn't with Lanterman's band in Pittsburgh, that I'd slipped away? Knowing that I was headed for Castletown in the first place, they'll come *here* to look for me. And I'll be waiting for them."

A little pallor came into Martha's face. "What are you going to do, Jay?"

"I'm going to set up a little ambush for them, right down in the center of town," he said grimly. "You'll be quite safe here, until - - - "

SHE INTERRUPTED passionately. "No. I'm going with you." He started to argue, and then he saw the desperation in her eyes. "Jay, you don't know what it's

been like to be so alone. I'm not letting you go without me."

He said, after a moment, "Maybe you're right. But we'd better get started. Do you have a gun?"

She produced an ancient revolver. "I found this, in the house next door. I wanted something - - - I was so afraid the Brotherhood would come here - - - "

Wales nodded. "We'll get you something better than that. Now listen, Martha. You must keep silent, you must do what I say. There's no one at all to help us, if things go wrong."

She nodded. He opened the back door and they went out of the old house, and across its ragged back yard to the alley.

Wales, his gun in his hand, led the way down the alley. Where it crossed Grant Street, he stopped, stuck his head out and peered both ways. The street of old houses was still and dead. The maples along it drowsed in the dying sunlight. A little breeze whispered, and was quiet again.

Wales and Martha darted across the street fast, into the shelter of the alley again. As they went down it, hugging the backs of buildings, heading toward the Diamond, Wales had again that fantastic feeling of unreality.

He remembered every foot of these blocks. How many times, car-

rying a newspaper route as a boy, he had short-cutted along this alley. And how would a boy dream that he would come back to it someday, when the familiar town lay silent and empty before approaching world's end?

They reached the Diamond, an oval of grass with benches and a Civil War monument and with the three-story storefronts all around it, their dusty windows looking down like blind eyes. "KEEP RIGHT" said a big sign at each end of the Diamond, but nothing moved along the wide street, nothing at all.

Wales peered from a doorway, then took Martha's wrist and hurried across. Dutton's Hardware, with its windows still full of fishing-tackle displays, was on the other side. But when he tried the door, it was locked.

He could smash the plate-glass of the door but that would be to advertise his presence inside. He hurried, tense and sweating now, around to the alley in back of the store. The back door by the little loading platform was locked too, but he broke a window with his gun-butt.

The shattering of the glass sounded in the silent town like an avalanche. Wales swore under his breath, waited, listened.

There was no sound. He got the

window open, and drew Martha in after him into the dim interior of the store.

"Why here?" she whispered, now.

"Anyone who comes searching Castletown for me is bound to come to the Diamond sooner or later," he told her. "It's our best place to watch."

He had another reason. He went forward through the obscurity of the store, through sheaves of axe-handles and rural mail-boxes in piles, with the hardware-store smell of oil and leather and paint strong in his nostrils.

He found a gun-rack. All rifles and pistols were gone but there were still a row of shotguns, the barrels gleaming in the dimness like organ-pipes. In the worn, deep wooden drawers beneath, he found shells.

"I seem to remember you used to go after pheasant with Lee," he said.

Martha nodded, and took one of the pumpguns.

"Just don't use it, until I tell you," he said.

They went on, toward the front of the store. Then they sat down, and through the show-windows they could look out on the Diamond.

The sun sank lower. The man on the monument cast a longer and longer shadow across empty benches where once old men of Castletown

had gossiped.

Nothing happened.

Wales, waiting, thought how outraged crusty Mr. Dutton would have been by what they'd done. It had been like him to carefully lock up the store, front and back, before he left it forever.

He looked across the Diamond, at the Busy Bee Cafe, at the Electric Shoe Repair Shop, at the old brick YWCA.

Twilight deepened. Martha moved a little, beside him. He hoped she wasn't losing her nerve.

Then he realized she had been nudging him. She whispered, "Jay."

At the same moment he heard a thrumming sound. Even here inside the store, it seemed unnaturally loud in the silent town. He crouched lower.

A long green car came down the street and swung around the Diamond, and then with squealing brakes it came to a stop.

The hunters had come to Castletown.

CHAPTER VI

THREE MEN GOT OUT of the car and stood there in the dusk, at the south side of the Diamond.

They wore windbreakers and slacks. One of them was short and pudgy, the other two were average-

looking men. All of them carried Venn guns.

They talked, briefly. One of the average men seemed to be the leader, Wales thought, from the way he gesticulated and spoke.

"What are they going to do?" whispered Martha.

"Look for me," Wales said. "A hundred to one they've left a man at the Observatory, and at your home - - - in case I come there. And these three are going to search downtown for me."

The three separated. One walked east along Washington Street. The other one got back into the car and drove off on North Jefferson. The remaining man - - - the dark-haired pudgy one, started going around the Diamond, keeping close to the fronts of the stores, ready to dart into cover at any moment.

An idea came to Wales, and he acted upon it at once. He crept to the front door of the hardware store, unlocked it, and silently opened it a few inches.

He came back, rummaged frantically in the dimness of the shelves till he found a spool of wire. Then he told Martha,

"Come on, now - - - get down behind this counter. And stay there."

"Jay, he's coming this way!" she protested. "He'll see the door

ajar - - - "

He interrupted. "Yes. I want him to. Do as I say."

Her face white in the dusk, she got down behind the counter, back in the middle of the store.

Wales crept swiftly to the front of the store, whipped behind the counter there, and crouched down.

Now, with the door ajar, he could hear the pudgy man coming along the sidewalk. Then he saw him, his heavy, doughy face turning alertly from side to side as he came along.

The man stopped and the tommy-gun in his hands came up fast. He had seen the hardware-store door was a little open.

With the gun held high, the pudgy man came slowly to the door. His foot kicked it wide open. He peered into the dimness of the store, poised on his feet like a dancer, ready to turn instantly.

Wales' fingers closed on a little carton of hinges, under the counter. He suddenly hurled the little box toward the other side of the store. It struck a display of tinware with a tremendous clatter.

The pudgy man whirled toward that direction, in a flash.

With a movement as swift, Wales darted out in the same moment and jammed his pistol into the pudgy man's back.

"Let go of that gun," Wales

said, "or I'll blow your spine out!"

He saw the pudgy man stiffen and arch his back in a convulsive movement. Wales' finger tightened on the trigger. But, before he pulled it, the tommy-gun clattered to the floor.

"Martha," said Wales.

She came, fast, her face white and scared in the dusk.

"Take this wire and tie his wrists behind him," Wales said. "Don't get in front of my gun."

With shaking fingers, she did as he ordered. "Now shut the front door."

Wales turned the pudgy man around. "Now sit down, on the floor. First sound you make above a whisper, you're dead."

The pudgy man spoke, in a high falsetto whisper. "You're dead, right now. Whatever happens to me, *you* won't get out of Castle-town."

"Don't worry about us," Wales advised. "Worry about yourself. Where's Lee Kendrick?"

The pudgy man looked at him calmly. "I don't know what you're talking about."

Martha whispered, with astounding fierceness, "Make him tell, Jay."

WALES FIRST SEARCHED their prisoner. He found no papers on him at all, nothing but

clips for the gun. Pudgy seemed quite unperturbed.

"All right, where's Kendrick?" Wales said again.

Pudgy said, "You talking about the Kendrick that discovered Doomsday coming? *The* Kendrick? How should I know?"

"Who are you working for?" Wales persisted. "Who took Kendrick, who sent you to follow me here from New York. The Brotherhood?"

Pudgy looked at him in blank surprise. "Huh?"

"The Brotherhood of Atonement," Wales said. "You're one of them, aren't you? They've got Kendrick, haven't they? Where?"

Pudgy's face split in the beginnings of a guffaw. Wales raised his pistol quickly, and the man choked off the laugh. But his sides shook.

"Me one of that Brotherhood? You're funny. You're really funny, Wales."

"So you know me," Wales snapped. "You know all about me, you came trailing me when I started to hunt for Kendrick. Who sent you?"

A queer gleam came into the eyes of Pudgy, but he remained silent.

Something in that look made Wales whirl around. Their prisoner sat facing the store-front.

Out there in the dusk, one of the two other men had come back

into the Diamond.

"Martha," whispered Wales.

"Yes?"

"Take your shotgun. If he tries to open his mouth, bring it down on his head."

Promptly, she picked up the shotgun and stood with it raised. Pudgy looked up at her, and winced.

Wales crept back to the front of the store and looked out. The other man out there seemed worried, holding his Venn gun high and looking slowly all around the Diamond. That he was worried by Pudgy's absence, Wales knew.

The man out there got into cover behind the pedestal of the monument, and waited. Waiting, obviously, for the man with the car to come back.

Minutes passed. The twilight was deepening into the soft May darkness. Suddenly Martha whispered.

"Jay!"

He swung around. Her face was a queer white blur in the darkness. "What?"

"I hear singing," she said. "Someone is singing, away off."

"Just the wind in the wires," he said. "There's no one in the whole town but us - - - and them. You keep your eye on that fellow, I think we're due for trouble soon."

He waited again. From outside,

he could hear the sound of the wind rising and falling. Then a strange conviction crept over him.

It was not the wind. It was the rise and fall of distant voices, many of them. Now the breeze brought it through the night a little louder, now it ebbed back to a murmur. Carefully, Wales opened the door a crack to listen.

He exclaimed, "It's from up on North Hill, but what in the world - - - "

He suddenly crouched lower again, his pistol raised. Down the hill along North Jefferson came the long green car, racing, fast.

It swung around the Diamond. The man in it leaned out and called. The man behind the monument ran out to meet him, talking fast and gesticulating.

But the driver of the car pointed northward and shouted. Wales could not see his face but he could hear the raw tone of his voice, and caught the one final word, " - - - coming!"

The other man leaped into the car, after a last look around the empty Diamond. The car shot away down Washington, heading east.

"Why, they've gone, run away!" Martha exclaimed. "They left their partner here and - - - "

Wales held up his hand. "Listen!"

As the roar of the receding car died away, the sound of singing came again - - - and this time it was louder, much louder, and there was a steady throb of drums beneath it.

It rolled down from the north and he thought now he could hear the words of a chorus, endlessly repeated.

"Halle-lu-jah! Halle-lu-jah - - - "

Lights suddenly sprang into being up there on the crest of North Jefferson Street hill. They were not steady lights, they were moving, tossing and shaking, and there were dozens, scores of them. They were torches.

A long, thick snake of burning torches came down the wide street into the dark and lifeless town. Wales could see no people, only the torches, scores of them, hundreds of them. But he could hear the loud chanting of the people who carried those lighted brands.

"Halle-lu-jah - - - "

Crash-crash-boom, thundered drums from the forefront of the river of torches, and Wales felt a wild quickening of their beat and of the chanting voices, that checked his breathing.

Martha uttered a low cry. "Jay, it's the Brotherhood coming! The fanatics coming *here* now, to - - - "

The hair bristled on Wales' neck. She did not need to finish the

horried exclamation. The nightmare shape of the looming event was only too clear.

From town to town the Brotherhood of Atonement marched, those weak, crazed minds unhinged by the coming of Doomsday. Brighton Falls they had burned, and Sharon, and God knows how many other deserted towns. And now it was the turn of Castletown, to be a sacrifice and an atonement

He wanted to turn and flee from that mad, oncoming parade. But he did not. He crouched, watching, and he felt Martha, beside him, shivering.

"Jay, if they have Lee . . . he might be with them!"

"That's what I'm hoping for," he whispered.

NOW THE TORCHES were coming down into the Diamond, and now he could see the people who carried them. They started around the oval, and the tossing of the red burning brands was flashed back from the windows all around, that shone like big eyes watching in amazement.

First, ahead of the torches, marched a half-dozen men and women with drums, beating a heavy, absolutely unvarying rhythm. After them came the main mass. He thought there might be two to three hundred of them.

Men, women, children. Torn and dusty clothes, unkempt hair, unshaven faces, but eyes glittering with a wild, rapt emotion, voices shouting the endless chorus of

The Brotherhood of Atonement

Halle-LU-jah!

These crazed fanatics were gripped by no religious passion. The religious folk of the world had seen God's hand in the saving of Earth's peoples by man's newly-won knowledge. But these shouting marchers had gone back to dark barbarism, to pagan propitiation of a threatening fate, back beyond all civilization.

Boom-boom crashed the drums, right in front of the Dutton store, as the van of the mad parade swept past, following a tightening path around the oval, making room for more and more of the torch-bearers here in the center of the old town. And presently they were all in the Diamond, a packed mass of wild faces and shaken torches, all turned toward the center where the monument stood.

A man with a white face and burning eyes leaped up onto the pedestal of the monument, and the drums banged louder and a great cry went up from the Brotherhood. He began to speak, his voice shrill and high.

"Jay, do you see Lee? I

don't - - - ”

“No,” Wales said. “He’s not with them.”

From out there, across the waving torches, came the screeching voice. “ - - - burn the places of sin, and the powers of night and space will see the shining signs of our Atonement, and withhold their wrath - - - ”

Martha said, “Oh, Jay, they’re going to burn Castletown. Can’t we stop them, somehow - - - ”

He took her by the shoulders. She had had too much, but he could have no hysteria now.

“Martha, we can’t stop them, they’d tear us to shreds! And what *difference* does it make now? Don’t you realize - - - in four months this town and all towns will be destroyed anyway!”

Their prisoner, back in the darkness, suddenly raised his voice. Wales leaped back, pressed his pistol against the pudgy man’s body.

“You call out and you get it now!” Wales warned savagely.

Pudgy looked up at him, and said hoarsely, “Are you crazy? Those maniacs aren’t friends of mine! They’re going to burn this whole town like they burned others - - - we got to get out of here!”

The frantic fear in the man’s voice was utterly sincere. And to Wales, crouching beside the captive, came a shattering enlightenment.

ment.

He said, “Then you and your pals aren’t working for the Brotherhood? Then it wasn’t the Brotherhood that took Lee Kendrick, after all?”

“They’re maniacs!” said Pudgy, again. “For Christ’s sake, Wales, are you going to let them burn us alive?”

Wales stooped, grabbed the man by the throat. “It’s not the Brotherhood who took Kendrick, then. All right - - - who was it? Who wants to see millions of people trapped on Earth? Who sent you after me? *Who?*”

Pudgy’s voice turned raw and raging. “Get me out of here, and I’ll tell you. But if we stay here, we’re goners.”

“You’ll tell me right now!”

Pudgy remained sullenly silent. Then, of a sudden, the single high screeching voice out in the diamond ended, on a frenzied note.

Boom-boom, crashed out the drums again. The Brotherhood roared, as with the single voice of a mighty beast. The men with torches began to mill, to split off from the main mass, to run into the four main cross streets, shaking their firebrands and shouting.

One yelling woman applied her torch to the faded, canvas awning in front of the Electric Shoe Repair Parlor. The canvas blazed up,

and the drums rolled again.

"Jay!" cried Martha.

Wales forced Pudgy to his feet, faced him toward the front windows, and the torch-blazing chaos out beyond them.

"Martha and I are going, out the back way," Wales said. "We're leaving *you* here tied and helpless - - - unless you tell!"

CHAPTER VII

A THROBBING, LURID light beat in through the front windows of the store, as the flames across the Diamond swept up the fronts of old buildings. The hoarse hallelujah-chorus of the Brotherhood, the quickened booming of the drums, was louder. And the fiery light illumined the bloodless, distorted face of their prisoner as he stared up at Wales and Martha.

Wales still felt the shock of terrible surprise. He had been so *sure* that only the mad Brotherhood could possibly be behind the plot to seize Kendrick, the ghastly scheme to keep millions of people on Earth until Doomsday crashed down upon them. Who else but madmen would do such a thing? Who else would have any motive?

He didn't know. But their pudgy prisoner knew. And, even at the risk of trapping Martha and himself in the holocaust of Castletown,

he meant to find out.

"Please," panted Pudgy. "We haven't got a chance if we stay here longer. I've seen these maniacs and their Atonements. They won't leave a building standing here!"

Wales looked at Martha's white face. "All right, Martha, we'll get going. We'll leave this fellow here." He started to turn away.

"No, it's murder!" screamed Pudgy. "You can't leave me here, my hands tied - - - "

"Then tell," Wales pressed. "Who seized Kendrick? Who's behind all this?"

Beads of sweat stood out on Pudgy's dough-white face. His eyes rolled horribly, and then he said hoarsely,

"Fairlie. John Fairlie. And others - - - "

"Fairlie? The regional Evacuation Marshal? What about him?" Wales demanded.

"He - - - and friends of his, other Evacuation officials - - - they're the ones," Pudgy said. "They've got Lee Kendrick. They're the ones that want a lot of people left on Earth."

Furious, Wales took their prisoner by his fat throat and shook him. "All right, you had your chance," he raged. "And you tell us a brazen lie like that. By God, we *are* leaving you - - - "

Pudgy's voice rose almost to a

scream. "It's the truth! You made me tell you, now I've done it, and you won't believe me! There's a bunch of them in it, I don't know how many. I know that besides Fairlie, there's a couple of assistant Evacuation Marshals in other countries and some minor officials and some others I don't know. I've seen them, up near New York. It's where they've got Lee Kendrick. They'd kill me for telling, and now I've told and you won't believe - - - "

Martha said uncertainly, "Oh, Jay, maybe he is telling the truth - - - maybe that's where Lee is!"

Wales exclaimed, "Don't you see what a lie it is? John Fairlie is one of the men charged with evacuating all the people off Earth - - - why would he and other Evacuation officials want to trick millions into staying here?"

"Because they don't want them on Mars, because they think they're scum and ought to be left on Earth!" Pudgy cried. "I heard them talk, didn't I? Talk about how hard it's going to be for years on Mars with too many people there, already. And about how it'd be better for everyone if a lot of ignorant crumb-bums and their families weren't taken to Mars to be a load on everyone else. Didn't I hear them - - - "

Wales' rage at their prisoner re-

ceded, swept away by an icy tide of terrible doubt that despite himself was rising now in his mind.

HE REMEMBERED things, now. He remembered Fairlie's grim face as he'd spoken broodingly of how hard a life it would be on Mars, with every one of Earth's millions there. He remembered the bitterly contemptuous way in which Fairlie - - - and Bliss and Chaumez and Holst - - - had spoken of the looters, the ignorant resisters, the crazy folk, whom it would be difficult to evacuate from Earth.

"Only fanatics would want to trap millions on Earth - - - " He, Wales, had said that. He'd been thinking then of the Brotherhood. But suppose there were other and more terrible fanatics? Fanatics who ruthlessly decided that the more backward and ignorant of Earth's millions would only be a burden in the hard years ahead, on Mars - - - and who secretly planned to trick those millions into staying until it was too late?

Such things had been planned and done before, by egotistical, self-appointed guardians of the public interest! And if - - - if this was the truth, it explained why he, Wales, had been followed, it explained why Fairlie had made him suspect the Brotherhood, it explained many things - - -

Halle-lu-jah! roared the chorus of howling voices, out in the streets. And the ruddy, throbbing light increased in intensity suddenly.

"Jay!" cried Martha, in tones of horror. He whirled around.

The front of the hardware store was on fire, with flames writhing around the edges of the windows, outside.

"You've got us killed!" sobbed Pudgy.

Wales, his thoughts now a chaos, realized that he dared delay no longer. He picked up the Venn gun, and then yanked their prisoner to his feet.

"Come on, Martha," he said. "Out that back window."

Pudgy stumbled awkwardly, his hands still bound behind him. They hurried back through the old store, with the fire-light beating brighter from behind them, and got through the window into the alley.

To their left flames shot skyward with a roar from the Penn Hotel, showers of sparks sailing into the darkness. A glance told Wales that the Brotherhood had fires going along whole blocks of Mercer and South Jefferson Streets.

"This way," he cried, starting down the alley that ran southward between the streets. He had Pudgy by the shoulder, but there was no need to make their terrified pri-

soner hurry.

Wales put everything from his mind, but the necessity of escape from the holocaust of this latest flaming Atonement. And the new suspicion in his mind was so shocking that he didn't want to think of it until he had to.

He knew the alleys and streets of Castletown, even in darkness. And they had light to guide them - - - more and more light throbbing up into the night sky behind them.

He cut across Mill Street, and on up southeastward to a residential street of cottages. Here, he gave Martha his pistol and had her stand guard over Pudgy while he himself looked for a car.

He found one, in the garage attached to the first cottage. He had to break through the house itself to enter the garage. The rooms were just as someone had left them, the furniture, the rugs, all the things they could not take with them in Evacuation, still in place.

Again, Wales felt a pang. Someone had toiled and planned for this little house and the things in it. And now it would not even endure until the common Doomsday - - - it would perish in the senseless flames.

He drove out into the street, and pushed Pudgy into the back seat. Taking no chances, he tied their

prisoner's ankles too. Then, with Martha beside him, Wales drove fast up the steep streets southeast.

"Jay - - - look!" she cried, when they reached a crest. She was looking back. He stopped the car, and looked back with her.

The whole downtown section of Castletown blazed high toward the stars. The wind whirled sparks away in burning clouds, and a great pall of smoke lay toward them.

Southward from the center of town moved a river of torches. And from those streets, only now just kindling, above the crackle of flames came the distant boom of the Brotherhood drums, and their rising and falling chant.

Martha was crying. He put his arm around her, and turned her away from the sight.

"It doesn't mean anything, Martha. It would have only lasted the few months till Doomsday, anyway."

Yet he could understand her emotion. It had been a long time since he had lived in Castletown. But he wished his last look at the old town had not been like this.

He turned toward Pudgy. "Now you can talk. Let's have it."

Pudgy said sullenly, "I've already talked too much. You didn't believe me, anyway."

Wales' face hardened. He said, "All right. The flames will reach

this residential section in an hour. We'll leave you here."

It was enough. Their prisoner's doughy face seemed to fall apart a little.

"All right!" he cried. "But what's the use telling you when you just say I'm lying?"

"Nevertheless, give it to me from the first," Wales ordered.

Pudgy said, "Look, this whole scheme to keep the crummy no-goods here on Earth - - that wasn't *my* idea. Five years ago, when they were first organizing Operation Doomsday, I got a job in the Evacuation Police. I did all right. Pretty soon I was a sergeant. Then - - I began to hear things about the Evacuation from one of the other sergeants."

The man paused, then went on. "Eugene - - that was my friend in the Police - - told me that Fairlie and some other Evacuation officials needed some men for special secret police work. Said the work was so important and so secret nobody must know about it. I said okay, I'd like to be one of these special secret Evacuation Police. So they took me in. And Fairlie himself talked to me and a couple of others."

WALES, WATCHING Pudgy narrowly, saw him mop the sweat off his brow. "Fairlie told

us, that they weren't going to be able to get *everybody* off Earth before Doomsday. He said it was impossible, there was bound to be millions would get left. He told us that he and some of the other officials in key places in the Evacuation had decided that since they were going to have to leave people, it'd be better to leave a lot of crummy hillbillies and share croppers and ignorant trash. He said they'd only make things tougher for everyone on Mars, anyway. It was better, Fairlie said, to weed them out and leave them here."

An icy feeling of terrible conviction began to grow in Wales, despite all his attempts to repel it.

He'd heard just that kind of talk, before. Not openly, but in sly whispers and hints. People who felt sure of escaping from Earth themselves had expressed aristocratic regret that *all* Earth's people must be saved, that they must be burdened on the new world by the "backward."

No one had quite dared to advocate such ideas publicly. But there were those who secretly held them. And those who did, very well might have secretly decided to see that the "useless, backward" ones *didn't* escape Earth. Fairlie -- and others like him -- could be among them --

"Fairlie told us," Pudgy went on, "that they wouldn't prevent anyone leaving that wanted to leave. But, he said, lots of the dumber ones wouldn't want to leave if things were managed right, and that would solve the whole problem."

Martha interrupted. "But my brother -- what of him? You said they had Lee?"

Pudgy nodded. "I was coming to that. Fairlie called some of us in real worried one night and told us we had to go to Castletown and grab Lee Kendrick. He said they'd been sounding Kendrick out about helping along the scheme, and that Kendrick wouldn't play ball."

"You mean," Wales said quickly, "that Fairlie and his group wanted Kendrick to *help* them trap the 'backward ones' here on Earth?"

Pudgy's head bobbed. "Near as I got it, that was it. Kendrick could make a statement kind of throwing doubt on whether Doomsday would happen -- and the boobs would decide to stay. But I guess when Fairlie sounded him out a little, Kendrick was horrified at the idea, and Fairlie had to cover up fast and say he didn't mean it."

Martha clutched Wales' arm. "Jay, *that's* why Lee was so terri-

bly worried, so anxious -- that's why he wouldn't leave Earth! He was afraid such a scheme was really being planned!"

Wales could imagine that. He knew Lee Kendrick, and he knew that even a breath of suspicion of a plan so ruthless and terrible would have had a shattering effect on him.

"So," Pudgy finished, "before Kendrick could get too suspicious and start talking, we went to Castletown and grabbed him, and took him to New York. And his disappearance was nearly as good as his statement would have been -- the boobs all figured Kendrick hadn't left Earth, so they would not."

"But he's alive?" Martha cried. "They haven't killed him."

Pudgy shrugged. "Not so far. Fairlie still wants him to make that statement, so all the scum will feel sure it's safe and will stay on Earth till too late."

Wales suddenly felt a revulsion from all that he had heard, from the shocking nightmare quality of it.

"It's not true, it *can't* be true!" he exclaimed. "Martha, this man had to tell some story to save his skin, and that's all he's done!"

Her face was white in the distant firelight. "Jay, people have done things like that, terrible as it is. They *have* killed millions, in

the past, for just such reasons."

He knew that, too, and it was a knowledge he fought against -- struggling against a cold conviction that he could not quite down.

"If Lee is still alive, Lee could tell us!" she was saying. "If we could reach him, rescue him --"

Wales turned back to the sullen-faced Pudgy. "You said that Fairlie and the others were holding Kendrick near New York. Just where?"

"Where he's right handy and near, yet where nobody can walk in on him," said Pudgy. "Bedloe's Island, in New York harbor. You know, the old Statue of Liberty island."

Wales thought, his mind a turmoil. Now the flames were marching up the hillside streets toward them, and now the sound of drums and distant chanting came from away southward.

The Brotherhood were leaving Castletown, on their way to make some other lifeless city a fiery sign of their atonement.

"I still," said Wales, "can't believe it. But we'll prove it, one way or another. We'll go back to New York, and see if Lee is really on that island."

"You haven't got a prayer!" said Pudgy, his voice rising into a high whine. "They've got him guarded there."

"And you," Wales said, "can tell us just where the guards are and how best to pass them. Yes, you're going with us."

He ignored the man's frantic objections, and started the car. He headed eastward, to skirt the flaming city at a safe distance.

The danger ahead, the hunters who would still be seeking him, Wales ignored. What was there anywhere but danger, on an Earth rocking toward Doomsday?

CHAPTER VIII

THUNDER ROLLED and belowed across the night sky, mounting to a deafening crescendo. Up into the starry heavens rose a great black bulk, climbing starward on a column of fading fire. And hardly had its echoes ebbed than the dull explosions came again, and another rocket-ship took off in the unending Marslift.

Crouching with Martha in the darkness of an old pier, with the murmuring black vagueness of the Upper Harbor in front of them, Wales looked over his shoulder at the fiery finger that pointed out to man's new home in the sky. He turned back to Martha, as she whispered to him. She was staring out over the dark water.

"I don't see any lights, Jay. Not one."

"They wouldn't show lights," he said. "They'd not advertise the fact that they're there."

"If they're there," she said. "If Lee's there."

He took her roughly by the shoulders. "Martha, don't lose your nerve now. Think what depends on this."

He jerked his head in the direction of the distant New Jersey Spaceport, as still another Mars-bound ship rode up in majestic thunder and flame.

"There should be twice as many ships, twice as many evacuees, going out now as there are! All the people who doubt, who hold back, who refuse to go -- Lee is the key to saving them."

"But if we only had *help*, Jay! The authorities -- "

Wales said, "Fairlie, as regional Evacuation Marshal, is the top local authority here now. And don't you see -- if that story is true, Fairlie is the last man we dare let know we're here."

He took her hand. "Come on. We've still got to find a skiff of some kind."

They started along the dark waterfront. They were, Wales figured, somewhere in the southern Jersey City docks. Out in the dark harbor lay Bedloe's Island, and it was past midnight and there was little time.

He and Martha, with their prisoner, had come across Pennsylvania by unused, deserted back roads during the day. The circuitous route had taken time, and a few hours of sleep snatched in a thicket off the road had taken more time. But Wales had not dared to risk being seen.

If Pudgy's story was true, Fairlie was the enemy. Fairlie was the man who had sent hunters after him. And it would be so easy for the Evacuation Marshal, with his regional authority, to have Wales proclaimed an outlaw on some phony charge, and set every Evacuation Police post around New York looking for him.

They dared seek aid of no one. If Kendrick was a prisoner on the little island, they must attempt the rescue themselves. And that would not be easy, judging from what Pudgy had said.

Wales had driven into an alley in deserted Jersey City, and had dragged their bound prisoner into an empty store.

"Now," said Wales, "we're going to leave you here."

"Tied hand and foot?" cried Pudgy. "Why not kill me and get it over with? This town is closed out, I could yell all day and nobody would hear me. I'll starve! No one will ever come -- "

"We'll come, and free you,"

Wales said. "After we've got Kendrick off that island. But of course, if we fail, if they get us, then we'll never be back. I want you to think about that."

Pudgy had thought about it, and it was clear that he did not like that thought at all. When it had sunk in, Wales said,

"Now you tell us all you know about the set-up on that island. How many guards, where they usually are, how they're armed, where Kendrick is kept. Everything. If you brief us well enough, we *may* succeed -- and then we'll be back for you."

Pudgy had got the point. He had talked long and rapidly, feverishly giving Wales every scrap of information he possessed.

They had left him there, and had come by foot to the waterfront, and now if they had a boat, the island was only a little way ahead.

But there was no boat, not a canoe even, along these dark docks. Wales led the way farther along the waterfront. He dared not flash a light, and they might search all night amid these dark piers without success.

HE WAS BEGINNING to despair, when they came to a small boatyard. He found a skiff by stumbling over it in the dark.

There were no oars, but he soon forced the door of the dark office-shack and found those.

"Now before we start, Martha --" He was fitting the oars into locks that he'd made as silent as possible by rag mufflings. " -- when we reach the island, I want you to stay on the shore and wait."

"I'm not afraid --," she began, but Wales cut her short.

"Listen, it's not that. I'll be in the dark there. If I have to shoot, I want to be sure I'm not shooting you by mistake."

He pushed out onto the water, and bent to the oars, rowing steadily. The tide was running, and he had to allow for that, but there was only a little choppiness on the Upper Harbor.

Wales thought again how unreal everything on Earth seemed by now. And this scene most of all! This harbor had once been the busiest in the world, and by night the lights of shipping, of docks, of bridges, had flared everywhere, with the electric glow of Manhattan blazing over everything.

And now there was silence and darkness on the waters. All the millions who had lived around these shores had left Earth long ago, and their cities were dark and still. Only the downtown tip of Manhattan still showed patterns of lighted windows, where the

ceaseless activities of Operation Doomsday centered.

Wales rowed on, and then rested his oars a moment and turned and peered ahead in the darkness. He saw a lofty shadow now against the stars, and knew that it was the great Statue. He lifted the oars again, rowing now with infinite care to make no sound.

Brr-rumble- -oom- -oom- -oom-

Up into the sky westward rose another of the mighty Marslift rocket-ships, and then in quick succession, two more.

The flare of them in the heavens sent a wild, shaking light over the waters, over the little skiff.

"Get down!" Wales whispered frantically, and he and Martha crouched low in the little craft.

The *oom- -oom- -oom* faded away in muttering echoes. Wales could but pray that they had not been seen from the island ahead, and row on.

He hoped desperately that there would be no more rocket-ships taking off, no more flares in the sky, until he reached the island. It seemed to him that he rowed eternally, and got nowhere.

Then, in the darkness, Martha whispered warning. The skiff bumped land. Wales made out a low bank rising above them. He picked up the Venn gun and climbed ashore.

He whispered, "Stay in the skiff, Martha. You can push off if I fail." And added quickly, "Don't you see, if I do fail, you'll be the last hope left."

He gave her no time to argue. He gripped the Venn gun, and started through the darkness.

There was no doubt about directions. Huge now against the stars loomed the Statue. And in it, if Pudgy had told truth, were Lee Kendrick -- and the four of Fairlie's secret police who guarded him.

Wales crossed the park with his stubby gun held high. The grass was tall and ragged from long lack of care. And there was not a sound, or a light, on the little island.

He circled around to the front of the Statue, and stared up at the parapet of the mighty pedestal, and the entrance to the giant figure.

Nothing. No light, no sound of movement.

Wales felt a chill of dismay. He had not realized how much he had begun to hope, until now.

Brr-rumble - -

He heard the first preliminary roar from the west, and immediately he dropped flat behind a shrub.

THE FULL THUNDEROUS
diapason of take-off broke

around him, and the flaming exclamation point in the heavens blazed brightly.

And Wales saw a man, with a gun under his arm, standing on the parapet.

The flare of light died, and the rocket-roar grumbled away.

But now, as he rose to his feet, Wales felt a wild triumph. The guard was there, as Pudgy had said, and that meant - -

He moved forward, and started up the steps. He was more than halfway up them, moving softly, when he heard a movement above.

Wales froze. The guard above might not have heard him. But he could take no chances, with all that depended on him now.

He crouched waiting on the steps, the Venn gun raised. It seemed to him that hours went by.

Rumble-boom-boom - - - -

As the distant rocket-roar crashed again, as the column of fire streaked across the sky, by its light Wales saw the man on the parapet peering down toward him with his gun alertly raised.

Instantly, Wales shot him. He shot to kill.

The man dropped. Wales raced on up the steps, hoping that the brief burst of his Venn gun would not have been heard in the rocket-roar.

But a door above swung open,

and light spilled out from inside the base of the giant Statue. Two men appeared in the doorway, drawing pistols.

"What - - - " one cried.

Wales fired, a prolonged burst. He had no intention whatever of taking extra risks by sparing life. These men, and the men they worked for, would have taken the lives of millions. There was no mercy in him.

One of the two in the doorway fell. The other, blood welling from his shoulder, tried to shift his pistol to his other hand.

Wales, racing up to them, heard pounding footsteps inside the statue, and he took no time to shoot again. He clubbed the Venn gun's barrel down over the head of the wounded man, and sprang over him and the dead one in the doorway, right into the base of the lofty figure.

A light burned in here. He ran to the foot of the winding stair that led upward. Frantic feet running up above him made reverberating echoes. He glimpsed a pair of legs on the stair - -

He shot, and the legs crumpled and a man came sliding back down the stair, screaming and trying to aim his gun. Wales triggered again, and when the scream of ricochetting steel and the echoes of gunfire died away, there was silence

unbroken.

He started running up the stair. In a minute he heard Martha's voice calling, from down beneath.

"Jay!"

He shouted back down, and ran on, his heart pounding, his lungs pumping.

He came into the grotesque room of angled steel that was the inside of the giant head. There was a carefully shaded light here. And a man huddled on the floor near it, shackled to the wall.

WALES TURNED the light full on him. A bearded face looked at him, with wild dark eyes - - - a face he could hardly recognize.

"Lee?" he said. And then suddenly, he was sure. "Lee Kendrick."

Kendrick said, hesitantly, "Why it's Jay Wales. But you were on Mars. How - - - " And then Kendrick's eyes suddenly flamed and he shouted hoarsely. "Wales, you don't know what's happened, what they're planning - - - "

"I know," Wales said, stooping by him. "Take it easy. Please - - - "

Kendrick clutched him, babbling, pleading. Not until Martha came in, and stooped beside her brother, crying, could Wales get away.

He said, "Try to quiet down. There must be a key to these

shackles somewhere."

He went back down the stair. The man he had shot in the shoulder and then stunned, was now stirring and groaning.

Wales made a rough bandage for the bleeding shoulder, and then tied the man's wrists with his own belt. He thought it would hurt, when the man came to. He hoped it would.

He searched pockets until he found keys, and then went back up. Kendrick seemed to have got control of himself. He talked feverishly as Wales tried keys.

"There's still time before Doomsday, isn't there?" he pleaded. "Still time to get everybody off Earth? It isn't too late?"

"I think there may be time enough," Wales said. He got the shackles unlocked, and helped Kendrick to his feet. "But we've still Fairlie to reckon with."

Kendrick broke into raging curses, and Wales stopped him sharply. "Cut it, Lee. I feel exactly the same way about it but we've no time for hysteria. It'll be tricky trying to get to Fairlie in his own stronghold, over in New York. Tell me - - - has he come here often?"

"He hasn't been here for two weeks," Kendrick said. "He - - - and Bliss and the others in it with him - - - you know what they wanted of me? They wanted me to

issue statements saying that Nereus might not hit Earth after all. They said they'd leave me here for Doomsday, if I didn't. Damn them - - - "

Again, Wales calmed him down. "Those guards didn't go over to New York to report to him, did they? Did they use radiophone?"

Kendrick looked startled. "Why, yes, they did. I've heard them. But I don't know what secret wavelength they used."

"Maybe," said Wales tightly, "we can find that out. Martha, you help him down the stairs. A few steps at a time, till his legs steady."

He hurried back down again. The wounded man he had tied up had recovered consciousness. He sat, his face a pallor of pain, and looked up at Wales with wide, fearful eyes.

"Yes," said Wales softly. "I'd love to kill you. You're right about that. But maybe I won't. What's your name?"

"Mowler."

"You know how to call Fairlie, on the portable radiophone? Well, you're going to call him. You're going to tell him just what I say."

By the time he found the radiophone and brought it, Kendrick was coming shakily down the last steps with Martha steadyng him.

Wales asked Mowler, "What's the wave-length for Fairlie's private phone?"

Mowler, looking up into his face, shivered and told him. He set the dial.

Then he told the wounded man what to say. He finished, "Don't do it wrong."

Again looking into Wales' face, Mowler said, "I won't."

WALES TOUCHED the call-button. He held the instrument in front of Mowler. And presently a voice came from it.

"Fairlie speaking."

"Mowler here," said Mowler. "Our guest wants to see you. He says he's ready to make that statement now - - - any statement you want."

"About time," growled Fairlie's voice. "All right, I'll come."

Wales switched off the instrument and took it away. He went out on the parapet, and waited in the darkness with the Venn gun in his hands.

Martha and Kendrick came out, and as another Marslift ship flamed up across the sky, he saw that her face was white and strained.

She said, "Don't kill him, Jay."

He said, without turning, "The Evacuation has been delayed, and there may not be enough time to make up that delay. We may not get everyone off Earth in time. And everyone of those who are left

to face Doomsday will have been killed by Fairlie and his pals."

"I know," she said. "But don't, Jay."

He would make no promise, or answer. He waited. And they heard the purr of the fast power-boat, less than an hour later.

Dawn was gray in the eastern sky when Fairlie, and one armed man in Evacuation Police uniform, came up the steps to the pedestal.

Wales stepped out, the Venn gun levelled, and Kendrick came out behind him.

Fairlie stopped. The Police officer with him made an uncertain sound and movement.

"Don't be stupid," Fairlie said. "He's got us cold."

He came up a few more steps. He looked up at Wales, and there was in his powerful face an immense disgust.

"You're proud, aren't you, Wales?" said Fairlie. "You think you've done something big and gallant. You've saved, or tried to save, a lot of human lives and that makes you happy." He suddenly raged. "Human refuse! The weak, the unfit, the no-damned-good, that we've been saddled with all our lives here on Earth - - - and now we must take them with us to drag us all down on Mars."

"Don't, Jay," whispered Martha, and her voice was a painful sound.

Fairlie said:

"Let him. I'd sooner go out now as see all human civilization dragged down out there by the weight of the useless rabble who would be better dead."

Wales said, "You're so sure, just who should live and who should die. You felt such a big man, making secret decisions like that, didn't you? Fairlie, who knows what's best for everybody. You and your pals liked that feeling, didn't you? There have always been characters like you - - - "

He paused, and then he said, "We're going over to New York. We're going to have Kendrick tell his story to all the millions still on Earth, and it's a story that two of your own men will back up. We're going to try to get every last soul off Earth before Doomsday. But if we don't - - - "

"If you don't?" sneered Fairlie.

"You'll know it," said Wales, and now he was shaking. "Because you, Fairlie, will not leave Earth till every last soul is evacuated. If any human being faces Doomsday here, you'll face it right with him."

CHAPTER IX

OVER NEW YORK there hung in the sky a new moon, big and red and terrifying.

Once it had been a mere track on an astronomical photo, a figure in a calculation. Once it had been a threat, but an abstract one. Now it was real at last. Week by week, it had grown from a spark to a speck to a little moon, and now Kendrick's World was rushing in fast toward the fatal rendezvous with its bigger, sister world.

Wales sat at his desk in the office high in the UN tower, and looked out the window at the skyscrapers looming strange in the bloody light. There was a great silence everywhere. The frantic thunder of the Marslift was stilled at last. The last-but-one rockets had left at dusk, and now as night advanced it seemed that the whole Earth was hushed and waiting.

He felt a weariness that smothered all happiness of success. For they *had* succeeded, in these four frantic months. After Lee Kendrick had told his story to the world, after the plotters who had ruthlessly condemned millions "for the good of the race" had been exposed and arrested, those millions of dubious folk had suddenly felt the full panicky shock of truth, had realized at last that Doomsday was real.

They had poured into New York, in fear-driven mobs that could hardly be handled. And Wales, as the hastily appointed new Evacua-

tion Marshal, had felt in his soul that it was too late, that some would surely be left.

He had reckoned without that quality in human beings that draws their greatest strength out of peril. The Marslift had been speeded up, speeded up farther, speeded up until rocket-crews fainted of fatigue at their posts. But it had, at last, been done . . .

The door opened, and Martha came across the office to where Wales sat hunched and weary with his hands spread out on the empty desk.

"It's time, Jay," she said. "Lee and the others are waiting."

He looked slowly up at her. "We got them all off," he said.

"Yes. We got them all off."

"About one thing," he said, "Fairlie was right. It'll be hard on Mars for us, harder because of all those last millions. But I don't think anyone will ever complain."

He thought of the people who had streamed through New York, into the Marslift rockets, these last weeks and days.

He thought of Sam Lanterman and his people from Pittsburgh, and Lanterman complaining, "Hell, I got to own a whole city and what happens - - - I get scared out of it! Oh well, I guess it won't be so bad out there."

Martha touched his shoulder

gently. "Come, Jay."

He got to his feet and walked heavily with her to the lift.

They went down through the silent, empty building to the empty street. Empty, except for the car in which Kendrick and the two others waited, looking up silently at the crimson face of the thing that was coming fast, fast, toward Earth.

The car bore them fast through the empty streets, and the lifeless metropolis fell behind them and they pushed across a countryside already wearing a strange and ominous new aspect, to the Spaceport.

The last rocket waited, a silvery tower flashing back the red light from the sky. They got out of the car and walked toward it.

Hollenberg had won the honor of being the last rocket-captain to leave Earth. But he did not look as though he enjoyed that honor now.

"We're ready," he said.

Wales asked, "Is Fairlie aboard?"

Hollenberg nodded grimly. "Aboard, and locked up. He was the last evacuee taken on, as per orders."

They stood, looking at each other. It came to Wales what was the matter. They stood upon Earth, and it was the last time that they might ever stand upon it.

He said harshly, "If we're ready, let's go."

The rocket-ship bore them skyward on wings of flame and thunder, and an Earth empty of man lay waiting.

A MILLION MILES out in space, they watched from the observation port. They could see the planetoid only as a much smaller, dark mass against the blue, beautiful sphere of 'Earth.

"One minute, fifteen seconds," said Kendrick, in a dry, level voice.

Martha sobbed, and hid her face against Wales' shoulder, and he held her close.

"Thirty seconds."

And all Wales could think of was the cities and their silent streets, the little houses carefully locked and shuttered, the quiet country roads and old trees and fields, with the red moon looming over them, coming down upon them, closer, closer - - -

"She's struck," said Kendrick. And then, "Look - - - look - - -"

Wales saw. The blue sphere of Earth had suddenly changed, white steam laced with leaping flames enwrapped it, puffing out from it.

Giant winds tore the steam and he glimpsed tortured continents buckling, cracking, mountains rising - - -

He held Martha close, and watched until he could watch no more, and turned away. Kendrick, with his telescope set up, was talking rapidly.

"The continental damage isn't too bad. The seas are all steam now, but they'll condense again in time. Terrific volcanoes, but they'll not last too long. In time, It'll cool down - - -"

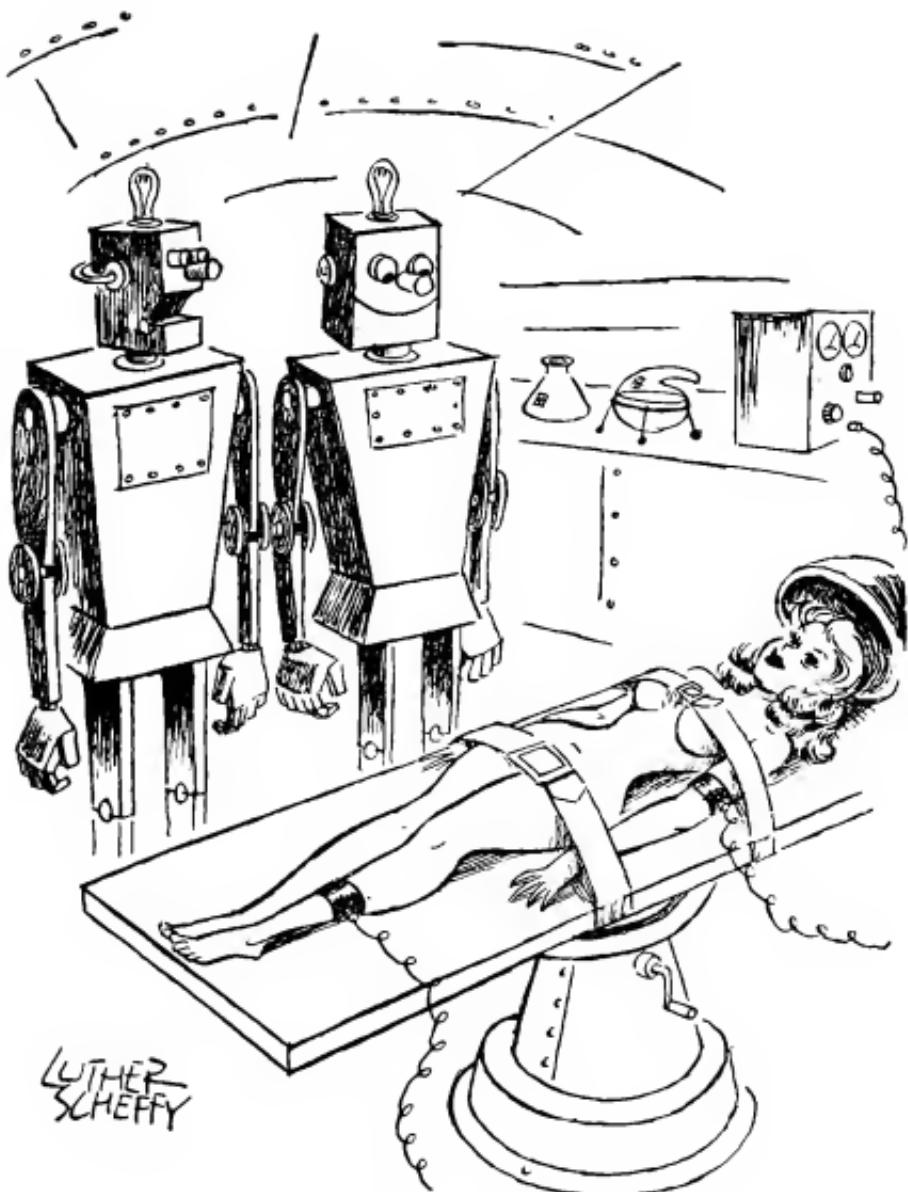
In time, Wales thought. In their time? Maybe not until their children's time?

He looked ahead, at the red spark of Mars, the world of refuge. It would be hard living on Mars, yes, for all the millions of men. But there were other worlds in space, and they had the knowledge and the ships. He thought they would go farther than Mars, much farther. He thought that they could not guess now, how far.

But someday, they or their children would come back to old Earth again. Of that, he was very sure.

THE END

ANNOUNCING OUR NEW FEATURE: "COSMIC PEN-CLUB"
FOR COMPLETE DETAILS READ OUR EDITORIAL ON PAGE 6



"I wish you'd invent something practical for a changel!"

The Alien Dies At Dawn

by

Alexander Blade

Kendall Stone had twelve hours to save a thousand lives. It wasn't much time, especially since someone was making sure he didn't use it!

HERE WAS A SCREAM of tortured air over the Mojave Spaceport as a two-man starship dropped on its hot jets toward the wide cementalloy landing field. It slowed and settled gently to the ground. Before the faint wisps of smoke had time to dissipate, the airlock door opened, and a big, broad-shouldered man got out. He dropped lithely to the ground and started off across the field at a quick trot.

He nearly bowled over a field attendant who had been coming toward him. "Hey!" the surprised attendant said. "Don't you want your ship checked?"

"Don't have time," Kendall Stone called back, as he continued running toward the Customs Office. He glanced at his watch. 1800. Twelve hours till dawn. Twelve hours!

Kendall Stone gritted his teeth and doubled his pace. He was in a super-plus top-level hurry. He'd practically burned a hole in the vacuum between Earth and Mars trying to get to Mojave on time. *Twelve hours!* At dawn, Galth of Rastol would die in the execution chamber for the crime of murder. And it was up to Kendall Stone to stop it.

He opened the door to the Main Lounge of the spaceport building and pushed his way through the thick, jostling crowd, moving slowly toward the Customs Office. He hardly noticed the people he shoved aside. There was only one thought in his mind: *I've only got twelve hours.*

Personally, Stone didn't give an octangle damn about Galth; he didn't even know the Rastolian personally - - had never heard of



him until a short time ago. But if Galth of Rastol died, so would a thousand others. The human colony on Rastol III would be wiped out in reprisal.

Including, Stone thought bitterly, the wife and two sons he had

left behind to go on this purchasing trip.

The Customs Office was in sight now. He threaded his way through the mob. Just before he reached the door, he was almost pushed off balance by a squat, chubby little

man who steadied him, apologized profusely, and went on his way.

Scowling angrily, Stone stepped inside the Customs Office. A hard-faced man in uniform sat behind the broad desk, looking up at him boredly.

"Yes?"

"I have a cargo of Martian *val-done* aboard my ship, and I want to report it," Stone said.

The official nodded. "Do you have the import permission papers?"

Kendall shook his head. "I don't intend to import the stuff to Earth; I'm just stopping over here until I can get some very important business cleared up. But *val-done* is a dangerous drug, and I simply wanted to report the fact that I have a hundred kilograms of it aboard my ship."

"I see," said the official, making a note on a minipad. "We'll have to put a seal on the ship until you are ready to take off again."

"That's perfectly all right," Kendall agreed. Anything would have been all right, as long as it didn't take much of the precious time remaining before dawn.

The official extended his hand. "Your papers, please."

Kendall reached inside his jacket pocket for the small booklet of identification papers. An icy shiver ran down his back.

The booklet was gone.

"What's the matter?" the official asked.

"My ID booklet is gone! I put it in my jacket just before I left the ship; I must have lost it on my way over here."

"If that's the case, someone will return it," the Customs official said. "It's of no use to anyone else. We'll send out a call for it. Meanwhile, I'm afraid you'll have to remain inside the spaceport."

Kendall scowled. Of all the lousy time-wasting pieces of red-tape, he thought. He felt trapped by bureaucracy. He didn't have time to waste hanging around the spaceport tonight.

"We'll also ask for confirmation over the subradio," said the official. "What is your home planet?"

"Rastol III, near Deneb."

"Very well. Even if we don't find your ID booklet, we can give you a temporary pass if you are identified from Rastol by subradio."

Stone felt a cold trickle of perspiration forming on his forehead. "That's going to take nearly twenty-four hours," he objected. "Isn't there a faster way?"

The official shook his head and shrugged, the timeless gesture of all bureaucrats. "I'm afraid not. Not unless we find your ID booklet."

LIKE A CAGED tiger, Kendall Stone paced the administration area of the spaceport for an hour, hoping doggedly that the ID booklet would turn up somewhere out on the field. But an hour later, there was still no sign of the booklet, and Stone felt himself growing desperate. The glowing ball of Sol had already set behind the western horizon. Night had fallen -- the night whose end would bring the death of Galth of Rastol and of a thousand innocent, unsuspecting colonists.

Stone stared at the polychrome hues of the sunset for a long minute, clenched his fists, and made his decision; there was only one thing to do.

He strolled quietly around the spaceport, looking for a way out. There were none which were unguarded; Earth didn't like unwanted or unauthorized colonists sneaking in on them.

Finally, he chose one of the smaller gates at random and walked up to the guard. The sign over the gate said: OFFICIAL PERSONNEL ONLY.

Kendall walked straight up to the guard as though he had every right in the galaxy to go through the gate. The man looked up at him unsuspiciously, as though waiting for Stone to produce his ID booklet.

Kendall kept walking toward him, putting his hand inside his jacket and fumbling around as though searching for the booklet. "Must be here someplace," he murmured, as he came within earshot.

When he was within three feet of the unsuspecting guard, Stone withdrew his hand and swung his fist in a hard, short arc which landed crunchingly on the point of the guard's chin. The man staggered and groped groggily for his gun.

"No you don't!" Stone said quietly. He sent another driving fist into the guard's solar plexus, and the man folded up like an empty potato sack.

Stone caught him before he hit the ground. "Sorry, pal," he whispered, "but I've got work to do." He lowered the guard gently to the ground.

The sudden shrill blast of a whistle broke the twilight silence somewhere to his left. Someone had seen the attack. Kendall didn't wait for further discussion. He ran at top speed through the gate and into the gathering darkness beyond.

Fifteen minutes later he was in Mojave City.

THE CITY, which had grown up around the spaceport, was a sprawling, busy place. Stone

headed straight into the heart of town.

He stopped in at the first store he met, and before the shopkeeper could say anything, he burst out with, "I'm in a hurry, friend. Can you tell me how to get to the Governor?"

The merchant, a small, pale man wearing a greasy apron, smiled and said, "You won't be able to get to him easily, my good sir. You'll have to see his Secretary. It's the way it's done."

"All right, where's his Secretary to be found?" Stone barked. He received full directions on how to reach the Secretary's residence, and snapped a "Thanks" and left.

It was a short trip by bus, but Stone decided to walk. Walking would work off some of the nervous energy that was accumulating in him, making him tense and keyed-up.

He reviewed the situation bitterly as he strode through the brightly-lit streets.

The Rastolians were a peculiar race. They looked something like reptiles walking on their hind feet, but they had warm blood and were mammalian in several respects. The Government of Earth knew that much about them.

What the Government didn't seem to know much about was the Rastolian moral code. The

Rastolians did not believe that any government had a right to kill one of its citizens. Even murder could be punished only by life imprisonment. Usually, though, a Rastolian convicted of murder was simply given a gun with one shot in it and left alone in his cell. Regardless of how despicable his crime may have been, no Rastolian was so completely without honor that he would refuse to take the proper steps to punish himself.

Galth of Rastol had been convicted and condemned. He had, the jury found, murdered an Earthman in cold blood over a gambling dispute. But if Earth sent him to the execution chamber, his fellow beings, outraged over the injury and the insult to their way of life, would take steps to avenge him. And that would be the end of the small colony of humans on Rastol III.

Stone thought of his wife -- who looked much too young to be the mother of two children, who looked as fresh and desirable as she had the day Stone had married her. She would perish with them. His sons; his home. He shook his head bitterly. The tragedy could be averted if he could reach the Governor's Secretary, if he could convince the Secretary that there must be a stay of execution. The Government had to allow Galth of

Rastol the chance to kill himself in accordance with his people's customs.

He glanced up at the street-sign. This was the street. It was a quiet, residential block, lacking the fluorescent streetlamps of the business district. He saw the house, and headed for it.

As he started up the long walk toward the house, two figures stepped out of the shadows.

"Put up your hands, Mr. Stone," said the taller of the two. "The Secretary wants to see you."

Stone frowned puzzledly, but made no resistance. He didn't care to argue with a naked gun, and they were taking him where he was heading anyway. He raised his hands and folded them behind his head, and let them march him up the concrete pathway.

THE SECRETARY was a heavy-set, heavy-jowled man with a smile on his lips and a calculating look in his eyes. He sat comfortably in an overinflated pneumochair, smoking a cigar.

"Well, Mr. Stone," he said, eyeing Kendall coldly, "may I ask you why you broke away from the spaceport? That is a serious offense, you know."

Stone moistened dry lips. "I know, Mr. Secretary, but it was an emergency. I lost my ID book-

let, and I had to get to see you before it was too late."

The Secretary ignored that. "What is your business, Mr. Stone?" he asked, narrowing his eyes penetratively. "Why have you come from Rastol III?"

"I came to pick up a hundred pounds of Martian *valdone*," Stone explained. "We use it on Rastol III to make antivirotic drugs in combination with extracts from Apler's Weed. The weed only grows on two planets, Rastol III and Vescalar IX."

The Secretary grinned complacently, but did not say anything. Stone began to sweat.

"While I was on Mars, I heard that the Rastolian native, Galth, was to be executed, so I came here to ask the Governor to stay the execution." He went on to explain in detail what would happen if Galth were to be executed.

When he finished, he stared at the Secretary, searching the man's face for some sign of interest. "Would you phone the Governor and tell him what I've just told you?" he asked hoarsely.

"I'm afraid we can't do anything like that on the word of an unidentified man, Mr. Stone," the Secretary said calmly. "As soon as your identification comes through - - "

"But that will be too late! Can't

you see that this may mean the death of thousands of innocent people?"

The Secretary held up his hand, palm out, for silence. "I'm sorry, Mr. Stone. I can't take the unsubstantiated word of every crackpot that comes in here." He reached over and turned on the visi-phone. "I'm going to have to call the police," he said. He looked over at the shorter of the two men who had brought Stone in. "Miller, take Mr. Stone into the other room and hold him until the police arrive."

The squat man took his gun out. "Let's go."

Kendall turned toward the man named Miller, and for the first time saw his face clearly. In the darkness outside, he hadn't had a really good look at the man, and since he'd been in the Secretary's study, he hadn't paid any attention to the men who stood behind him. But as he faced the pudgy little man, he realized that the face was definitely familiar. He struggled to recall where he had seen the man before.

"In here, fellow," the squat man said, jostling Stone into what was probably the library. Keeping the gun trained on him with one hand, Miller lit a cigarette with the other, and a cloud of bluish smoke curled upward.

Stone watched him. Suddenly, he remembered the face. The little man was the same one who had bumped into him in the spaceport terminal, just outside the Customs Room! He knew now what had happened to his ID booklet. The fat little man was a pickpocket.

And if he was working for the Secretary - -

Stone sucked in his breath sharply. This involved more than mere ignorance about Rastolian customs; this was a conspiracy to wipe out the colony of Earthmen up there!

He glanced at the clock on the wall. Not much time left. Overhead, he heard the gentle whirring of a police helicopter. They weren't wasting a moment in getting him clamped away where he couldn't do any harm.

He glanced up at the noise, and Miller automatically glanced up too. Kendall's hand shot out, enclosing the squat man's gun hand in a vice-like grip. Miller started to yell, but his antagonist's fist smashed into his mouth before he could say anything. Miller dropped to the floor.

Kendall picked up the gun, shoved it into his pocket, and threw the little man easily over his shoulder. Then he headed for the French windows that opened onto the balcony.

The police copter was landing on the roof as Kendall dropped from the balcony and sprinted silently across the lawn. He ran to the garage, opened the door to one of the Secretary's cars, and dumped Miller in the back seat. It was but the work of a moment to short through the starting switch. The hum of the turboelectric engine was completely drowned out by the whirring of the copter blades above.

Without turning on the headlights, Kendall rolled the car out into the street and drove toward an aircab stand. He was several blocks from the Secretary's house before he turned on the headlights.

HE PARKED the Secretary's car in a darkened alley a block away from the aircab office. As he drew back the handbrake, he heard Miller groan faintly in the back.

"Quiet, friend," he said soothingly, and tapped him lightly on the head with the butt of the gun. Rapidly he went through the fat little man's pockets, tossing out cards of all different sorts before finding what he was looking for. Sure enough, there was his ID booklet.

The picture was starting to take shape now, with everything falling into place except the answer to the

big question: *Why?*

Why was the Secretary so anxious to see Stone out of the way? What was the whole business about? He didn't know.

He pocketed the ID booklet. It wouldn't help him now, not with the police after him for breaking away from the spaceport, and maybe a kidnapping charge on top of that.

Glancing at Miller to make sure he'd be out for a while to come, Stone got out of the car and walked the block to the aircab office. It was easy to rent one of them. All he had to do was show the bored clerk his ID booklet, and sign for the cab.

"Remember," the clerk cautioned, "you can't take off inside the city limits. You'll have to drive outside Mojave first."

"I know," Kendall said as he shoved the bills across the counter. "Thanks."

He drove the aircar back to where he had left Miller in the Secretary's car, and transferred the unconscious man to the rear seat of the aircab. He looked around; no one in sight. *Good*, he thought. Then, in direct violation of the law, he lifted the aircar and headed into the night sky. The moon was bright overhead; the time was running short.

The Governor's palace was over

a hundred and fifty miles away. Stone figured he'd make it with very little time to spare. He set the autopilot, and reached back with one big hand to pick up Miller by his lapels.

"Wake up, Miller!"

The fat man shook his head groggily and opened one eye. He groaned.

Stone slapped him across the face, just hard enough to sting. "Come on, damn you, wake up!"

"Lemme alone," Miller murmured. A sharp blow with an open hand brought him to some attention. "Leggo."

Stone shook him until his head wobbled. "Get up and look alive. I want to talk to you."

"I ain't sayin' nothin'," Miller said sullenly. "I don't know nothin', and I can't tell you a thing."

A few seconds' quick persuasion and he had changed his mind. "All right!" he yelled. "All right! I ain't got anything to lose, anyhow, unless you want to get me for pickin' your pocket."

"I won't prosecute you if you talk," Kendall promised.

"Okay," Miller grunted. "You won't live to use the information anyway." He sat up and rubbed his jaw. "The Secretary owns a lot of stock in the colony that's making antivirotic drugs on Ves-

calor IX. He wanted to put Rastol III out of commission so that the drugs would have to be bought from Vescalon IX. So he framed this alien Galth and had him sentenced to the execution chamber. He knew what would happen if the Government executed a Rastolian."

Stone pounded his fist against the seat. "Don't the lives of a thousand innocent people mean anything to him?"

"I never asked him, mister."

Stone started to lash out angrily at Miller, then pulled back the fist. "Then Galth didn't kill the Earthman?"

"Nope. Penowski did. The tall guy who was with me in the Secretary's place."

Kendall reached out one hand and clamped it tightly on the small man's shoulder. Miller winced. "You're going to tell the Governor your story," Stone said. "Every word."

Miller shook his head. "Oh, no. You can slap me around all you want, but I ain't gonna get myself in hot water that way. No, sir, brother. If the - - LOOK OUT!"

Stone whirled and saw an air-car approaching, dropping down on his tail. A white-hot beam flashed from it, blistering the paint on Stone's ship.

LUCKILY, it was difficult for the other man to aim. The aircars were flying at close to three hundred miles an hour.

He snapped off the switch of the autopilot and sent the little aircar into a high, screaming climb. Another beam flashed by.

Kendall spun the ship into a back loop and barrel-rolled, bringing him in on the tail of the other aircar. But the other driver was cagey; he went into a hard right turn and tried to come up under Stone's vehicle.

Stone could see that the other aircraft definitely was not a police craft. An official car would have externally-mounted, automatically-controlled guns that would have shot Stone out of the skies with the first blast. No; this was a highly unofficial, extra-legal affair.

Another beam sizzled by so close that it gouged a spot out of the side of the ship. Stone reached down, groping for the gun he'd taken from Miller. It had been lying on the seat beside him, but it was gone now. Stone cursed. It must have slid to the floor when he spun the ship around.

"Never mind, Stone," Miller said coldly. "I got the gun now."

Kendall said nothing. He didn't even have time to curse. He was too busy trying to avoid the white-

hot blasts from the other aircar. He sent the ship into a power dive and shoved in on the throttle. He didn't know if the little car would take what he was going to give it, but it was his only chance. If he survived -- well, that was fine. If he didn't, the last hope of the little colony was dead.

"You'll kill us!" yelled Miller. He put the gun against Kendall's neck. "Stop it! You'll kill us!"

"Shut up and put that gun away, Miller," Stone snapped without moving his head. "If you shoot me, we'll both die. This is the only way we can keep your pals from murdering both of us."

Miller said nothing, but the cold pressure of the muzzle left Stone's neck.

Suddenly, Kendall heaved back on the control wheel, pulling the aircar out of its dive. He hung on grimly as the centrifugal force of the pullout dragged the blood from his brain. Then he blacked out.

When consciousness returned, the sturdy little aircar was climbing skyward. Stone glanced around. Miller was still unconscious, lying slumped in a rotund heap down at the floor of the aircab. Stone hauled him up, applied a hard punch to the jaw to make sure he'd stay that way, and let him sag back down. Then he grabbed the gun from the unconscious man's

lap.

The other aircar was about half a mile away, heading toward him. Evidently the other pilot had blacked out, too. Overhead the moon glittered brightly. The night was wearing along. And when the sun's rays trickled over the horizon - -

Holding on to the wheel with his right hand, Kendall opened the window a tiny bit and stuck his left hand out. The blast of air that tore past almost ripped the gun from his hand.

He gripped it harder, until the knuckles whitened, and turned the ship to face his assailant. A chill wind blew through the cabin. Sighting the pistol by instinct alone, he squeezed the trigger.

The blue-white beam speared out, burning off part of the control surfaces of the other car. It shuddered and spun, and then began to spiral downward.

Kendall Stone closed the window, grasped the controls, and pointed the aircar toward the Governor's palace.

THE GOVERNOR yawned sleepily as Kendall Stone finished his story. He glanced at Miller, who was pinioned securely between two burly Security Guards.

"Well?"

"It's true," the fat man said.

"Oh?" Stone asked. "Why the sudden nobility, Miller?"

"It's not nobility," Miller said. "They came after your ship knowing I was in it - - and that didn't keep them from shooting me down. Why shouldn't I turn them in, if it'll save my own skin?"

"You should have known," Kendall said, "that people like those two wouldn't hesitate to sacrifice you. They'd already planned to kill a whole colony, you know."

The Governor, who had watched the whole interchange of conversation rather impatiently, smiled grimly. "Mr. Stone, I think we all owe you an apology. This has been a gross miscarriage of justice." He was wide awake now. He turned to one of the guards.

"Fallon, get the Warden on the phone right away. Tell him the sentence of death on Galth of Rastol has been commuted. Tell him that the real murderer will be punished."

The guard returned a moment later.

"Well?" the Governor demanded.

"They were just leading him into the death cell when the message arrived," the guard said. "They've returned him to confinement pending the written pardon."

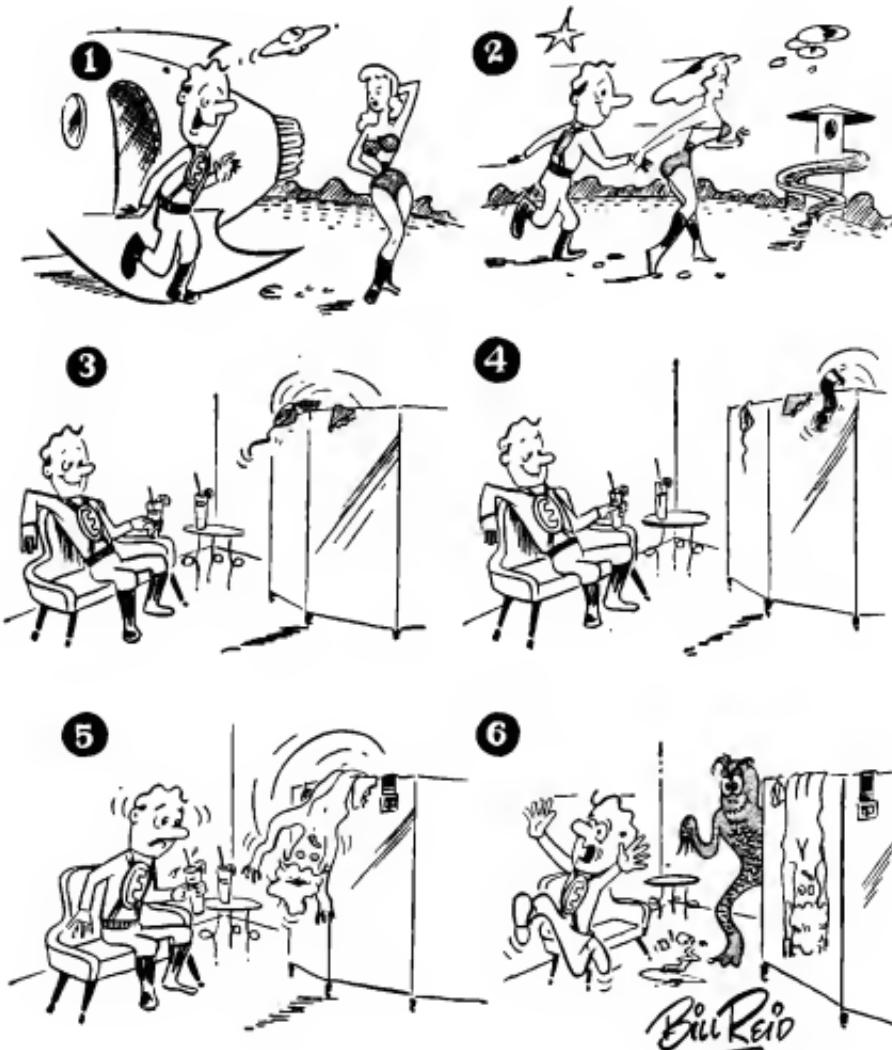
Kendall Stone sank down limply

on a chair.

He glanced at his watch. 0545.

Outside the window, the first rays of dawn were breaking

through the murky night. He thought of his family awakening light years away. The sun would be coming up too on Rastol . . .



The Thing In The Truck

by

Darius John Granger

There's nothing peculiar about a load of potatoes going to market—but we knew something was wrong when the spuds suddenly came to life!

IT STARTED with a load of potatoes.

Joe Loftus and I were driving the big semi-trailer back from Montauk that night after delivering a load of fishing gear to one of the big resorts out there and wondering if we'd be able to pick up a truckload of anything on the way back to increase the take when Joe spotted this sign.

It was one of those standard hand-painted *Return Load* signs, so we pulled in and I climbed down from the cab while Joe remained behind the wheel, ready to roll if they had nothing for us.

The sun was going down in a bank of heavy black clouds. I figured it might rain before the trip was over. I went over to the door of the farm house and knocked. Pretty soon I heard footsteps inside and a man chewing a mouthful of his supper opened the door

for me. He needed a shave and he had tired, defeated eyes.

"What's the load, friend," I said. "I saw the sign."

"Potatoes." He named a price.

"Well," I said in surprise. "That's cheap."

"Tell you the truth, bub. They got blasted."

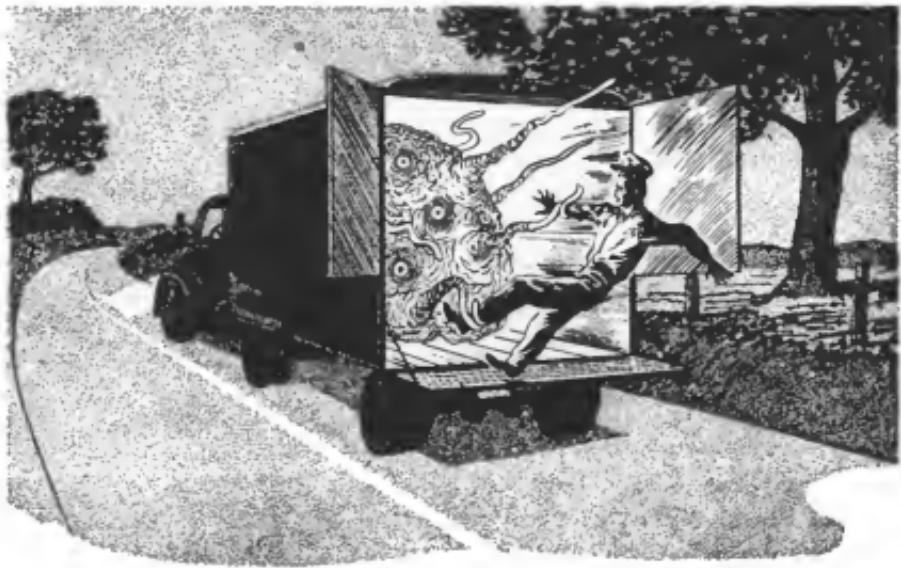
"Blasted? What do you mean?"

"Well, now, it's hard to say. Something fell and hit the storage barn."

"Fell?"

"Fell, bub. A bitty explosion. But nothing much. Maybe seventy percent of the load is good. The bad ones will be in sacks in the middle. Won't even know it. What do you say?"

That season potatoes were going good in the wholesale markets around the city. I figured Joe Loftus and I could clear a neat profit even if thirty percent of the



load was waste. So I agreed to the deal and for the next hour or so used the muscles of my back along with Joe, the farmer, and the farmer's two grown boys to load the sacks of potatoes into the empty van of our big semi-trailer. When he had finished I paid off the farmer and his wife gave us each a cup of coffee. Then Joe and I climbed into the cab and we rolled.

"Hear something?" Joe asked about half an hour later.

It was dark by then and traffic on the Montauk Highway was light. "Potato sacks shifting around," I said. "We didn't pack 'em too good, I guess."

The noise came again. Maybe it didn't really sound like sacks

shifting around in the van. I don't know. I was in a hurry to get home. It had been a long day.

I was driving. Joe squirmed around and peered through the rear window of the cab but could see nothing. "Stop the truck," he said.

"What for?"

"'Cause I don't like that noise. Something's going on back there."

"Sure," I said, grinning, "our farmer's a shrewdie. His boys are back there and they're eating up all the potatoes."

"Very funny. Just stop the damn truck."

I turned my head and looked at Joe's face. He was scared. Maybe he had one of those premonitions you read about. I shrugged and

found a widened stretch of road shoulder and pulled the big semi up. Joe hopped out of the cab and went around back. After a while I heard the rear doors swing open. Then they closed again and Joe came back. I hadn't heard him stomping around inside the van or anything.

"Sacks shifting around like I said?" I asked.

Joe's face was white in the dash light. He shook his head.

"Harry," he said. That's my name. Harry. "Harry, we was tricked."

"What do you mean, tricked?" I was getting a little annoyed with Joe. He stood half in and half out of the cab. I wanted to get moving.

"Ain't no potatoes," Joe said.

"No potatoes? What the hell are you talking about? We loaded those spuds ourselves."

"Ain't no potatoes," Joe repeated in a funny voice. "Harry, listen. Let's just leave the load and truck and everything and get the hell out of here."

I LOOKED at him and snorted, then swung out of the cab on my side and went around back. I undid the chain and the door-bar and pulled the tongue down so I could open the rear doors. Then I swung up into the van in the

darkness. *

There was a smell in there. Not a potato smell. To this day I still can't say what it was. But it was a funny smell and it made the short hairs on the back of my neck feel all cold and prickly-like.

I lit a match and swore. Joe was right. There just weren't any potatoes, I don't care *who* loaded them.

But there *was* something back there.

Call it jelly, if you want. I saw it and I can't do better. Say, two or three tons of quivering jelly filling up the center of the floor of the van.

Joe called: "Well?"

I was carrying a lighted match into the van with me. It burned my fingers. I lit another one and slowly approached the jelly. It didn't seem to have any color, so it took on the orange glowing color of the flaming match. It pulsed. I went near it, then stopped. There were still a few potatoes on the floor of the van, after all. I stood by while the jelly rolled sluggishly toward them. The potatoes were enveloped. In a minute there weren't any potatoes.

Then the jelly-thing stopped quivering. I came close and touched it gingerly with one finger. It burned. I withdrew my hand.

"Harry?" Joe called.

Just then I heard the sound of glass breaking. A section of the jelly had blubbered over against the van's small front window, smashing it. I didn't think a soft jelly would have the strength.

"Harry!" Joe shouted. It was like a shout of animal fear. I heard the sound of more glass breaking. The rear window of the cab, I thought. I hopped over the rear tongue of the van and sped around to the cab.

Joe was sitting there, smoking a cigarette.

"What's the matter?" I asked him. "What happened?"

"Nothing's the matter," he said. "You want to drive or want me to drive?"

"You just now yelled."

"Me? You sure I yelled, Harry?"

A car sped by, following its headlight beams. "Window's broke," I said.

"Is it?" Joe Loftus asked me in mild surprise. "Is it now? That's what you get for trying to shift those potatoes around in the middle of the trip."

"Potatoes!" I yelled.

"Hell, yeah. Potatoes. Hey, what's the matter with you, anyhow?"

"Potatoes," I said. "All right, so go take a look."

Joe scowled but went. In a little while I heard the tongue and

doors slamming and the chain being dragged across. Joe came back and gave me a long funny look. "Yeah, potatoes," he said.

I didn't push it. We'd been on the road a long time today. Sometimes the road can get to you like that. Maybe you read something about highway hypnotism. If you're driving too long on a good road like the Montauk Highway or one of the throughways, after a while you get to see things which aren't there or don't see things which are there. It can be plenty trouble but it wasn't going to hurt me tonight if I imagined a return load of Long Island potatoes was a big glob of jelly.

I scratched my head. "Highway's got you, huh?" Joe said. He knew the symptoms. "Tell you what, Harry? Why don't you sleep it off? I feel pretty good. I can take her in."

I thanked Joe and climbed up on the slab bunk in the rear of the cab. The window was broken back there, all right. You couldn't argue about that. But it was too dark to see into the van, except that I could see the van window was likewise shattered. I drifted off sleepily, not thinking about it much. Joe was a good driver, one of the best. Maybe when I opened my eyes we'd be in the city, heading for one of the big wholesale produce

markets

IT WAS RAINING when I awoke. Thunder rolled and rumbled and then split like a pine board overhead. Lightning was stabbing at the sky.

"Joe?" I said, sleepily.

He grunted a wordless answer.

"We near the city yet?"

"You only slept maybe half an hour, chum. Why don't you catch another forty?"

I said: "That's real white of you, pal."

Joe grunted again.

The truck lurched around a turn. The rain beat down. I opened my eyes and looked down past Joe's head. Just then a flash of lightning lit up the night. I caught a glimpse of a narrow two-lane asphalt road and stunted scrub pine growing in what looked like sandy ground.

"Hey!" I shouted. "This isn't the Montauk Highway. This isn't the way back. What's going on?"

"Just get some sleep, will you?" Joe said. "Detour back there."

"Wasn't any detour when we came out."

"Well, there's a detour now."

I was wide awake. I didn't like the way Joe sounded. "Listen," I said. "The road's fine. There wasn't anything wrong with the road. So why the detour?"

"Flash flood, I guess."

"It's raining. But it hasn't been raining that long and it isn't raining that hard."

"So I'm not the highway commission," Joe said. "Now get some sleep, will you?"

It was this on top of what I'd thought had happened to the potatoes. Something was up, I didn't know what. Funny how sometimes a thing like that doesn't get to you at first. What had the farmer said? Something fell on his load of potatoes. Fell? I thought now. From where? And hadn't he said something about a little explosion? Ten hours on the road, I thought. Ten hours on the road or we'd have asked him sure.

"Hey, Joe," I called down from the bunk. "When do we cut back West?"

"Soon as there's a road."

But soon a crossroad flashed by, dimly seen by the glow of distant lightning. Joe's face was set. He didn't look at me.

"Joe," I said. "Stop the truck."

"What's the matter now?"

"I want to check the potatoes," I said. "You know the lock bar isn't what it should be. Don't want to lose the load, do you?"

"I thought you said it wasn't a load of potatoes?"

"Highway hypnotism," I said. "I'll take your word for it. Hell,

I loaded them, didn't I?"

"You loaded them," Joe said, slowing the truck. I didn't really know what I wanted to do. I'd look inside the van, sure. If it had been highway hypnotism, I'd know it now. Because the illusion wouldn't last. They never do. But after that? After that I hadn't figured yet. Joe was acting funny. Real funny.

The truck stopped. I went around back in the hard, driving rain. It was an unfamiliar road, but the kind you find all up and down the East Coast near the ocean, with scrubby growths of pine on either side in sandy soil and no sign of civilization except the marching files of telephone poles. I pulled out the lock bar and swung down the tongue and opened the back doors.

Just then the truck growled to life. The rear tires spun and whined and threw pebbles at me. The truck lurched forward. I lunged after it, grabbing the swinging lock-chain and pulling myself up on the tongue. My right foot scraped along the ground and for a minute I thought I was going to lose my hold and fall off. But slowly I pulled myself up while the rain beat down on me. I tried to keep it quiet. As far as I knew, Joe thought he left me back there. That crazy Joe, I told myself, climbing

into the van. The rear doors swung in the wind, banging against the frame. Joe must have known I had opened them. He didn't seem to care. He was like a crazy man up there. We didn't work for any trucking company. This truck was ours. With what we made on it we hoped to buy another before long and start a fleet. Joe and Harry, trucking. But Joe was up there in the cab, acting like a crazy man, and I was back here in the van — with what?

I LISTENED. Nothing but the sound of the motor and the rain outside. I sniffed. That odd smell was gone. I fumbled for my matches and scratched one against the flint. It made a faint sudden sound and I thought I wasn't going to have any luck. But just then the match spluttered and flared and caught.

There were no potatoes. There wasn't any glob of jelly.

"Come on in away from the rain. Come over to me, Harry, honey," she said.

I dropped the match and it went out. It was a woman. There was a lovely blonde-haired woman in the van there. She had been dressed up like for a party, at least in the little I saw of her I thought that was the way she was dressed. And she was absolutely dry, as if she hadn't

somehow come in out of the rain or anything.

"Come on, Harry," she called in a seductive voice. "I'm waiting, Harry."

I walked stiffly into the van. Well, I'm human, aren't I?

I was fumbling again with the matches. I had to see her once more. If this was highway hypnotism, I was all for it. In the light of the first match she'd been beautiful. I struck the second match but the head crumbled wetly. I tossed it away irritably and was about to strike a third when her hand touched me. "Harry," she said. "Harry."

I never did get her name. What the hell, it didn't matter. She was only there for one purpose. Probably she didn't even have a name. She didn't need one. There was no before and no after for her. Only the all-containing now and a guy named Harry Miller.

"Do you like me, Harry?" she asked.

She came against me, softly firm and straining. She had a strong, musky perfume on her. Her hair touched my face and her voice whispered in my ear.

"Desire me," she said. "Do you desire me?"

Damn fool question, I thought without pushing it. Hell, yes, I

desired her. Who the hell wouldn't?

Outside, the rain drummed down. In the cab, Joe gunned the motor. I kissed the girl in the van and she returned my kiss hotly, avidly. "Harry," she said. I folded her in my arms and sat down on the floor of the van. The truck lurched and something rolled against my leg. I reached down with one hand. The woman sensed this. Her warm fingers touched my arm as she tried to draw my hand back. But I found what had rolled against my leg anyway. It was a potato. It was what should have been back there in the van in the first place, no lump of glob and no beautiful dame, just a return load of Long Island potatoes for market. I pushed the woman away from me and stood up, holding the potato like it was a talisman.

"Harry?" she cried, hurt in her voice. "What is it? What's the matter?"

I didn't answer her. I walked to the rear of the van and looked out. It was dark out there. The rain came down in a heavy, faintly silver curtain. After a while lightning lit the sky and I saw the road was running parallel to the ocean now. I figured we were somewhere not too far from Riverhead. Probably south and a little west of Riverhead, down by the water. But why? Why?

TEN MINUTES later, the big truck rolled to a stop. I jumped down from the van and sped around to the cab; slipping on wet sand. There was a salt spray with the wind-driven rain in the air, and I smelled the sea. I thought I could make out the gleam of the breakers through the darkness, but it might have been my imagination. I did hear the pounding roar of the surf, though.

I saw Joe's dark bulk getting down from the cab just as I reached it. "Are you gonna be any trouble, boy?" Joe asked me.

"Trouble?" I repeated his word. "What are you doing? What did you drive here for, Joe?"

He didn't answer. He went around to the van and helped the woman down. She said something and it almost sounded like she was crying. "Take it easy, baby," he told her. "It won't be long now."

The rain poured down, drenching all of us. The surf roared and hissed and boomed across the beach.

"Hey, where are you going!" I shouted. They were heading down across the sand.

They didn't answer. I could stay with the truck. I could pull the truck out of there. Or I could follow them and see what the hell was going on.

But just then Joe came back

from the beach. I couldn't see his face, but his voice sounded odd. "You better come down with us, Harry," he said. "She figures you know too much. I figure she's right."

We stood very close. In the dimness I could barely make out the big monkey wrench in Joe's hand. If I said no, he'd bop me one with the wrench. If I said yes and went down there with him, would he use the wrench on me later? It didn't look as if I had much choice. I went down across the sand with Joe.

The woman was waiting for us at the water's edge. The breakers were faintly phosphorescent with glowing plankton and I could see the outline of the woman's figure against them. Then Joe's bulky silhouette came between us. I stood there and stared out across the black sea.

Neither of them paid any attention to me. The breakers broke and foamed and rolled themselves out on the sand. The tide was coming in. The wind blew spray.

"You're waiting for something, aren't you?" I asked. It was a dumb question. They weren't down here for their health.

"Something coming in from the water?" I guessed. "submarine, maybe?"

Joe said: "We're not waiting for

something coming in from the water."

The woman said: "Don't tell him, Joe."

"Joe said: "Funny, you calling me Joe. Still calling me Joe."

The woman: "You're Joe. You're Joe until we leave."

Joe: "Yeah, but it's funny."

The woman: "I hear something, Joe."

Joe: "No. It's the wind."

The woman: "Will it be soon?"

Joe: "Yeah, soon. What we gonna do with him? With Harry?"

"He knows too much," the woman said, "but does it really matter?"

They were talking about me as if I wasn't there. Or like two grown people will talk about a little child in his presence, or maybe even like two people will talk about a dog, right in front of the dog, feeding the dog a juicy bone, maybe -- the day before they take it down to the pound.

They stopped talking. They stood there, waiting. After another twenty minutes or so, I began to hear something. Maybe they were listening too hard. Anyhow, I heard it first. A distant hissing sound. Before I knew it the sky had begun to grow brighter.

"Joe!" the woman cried happily. "Listen!"

"Yeah, and look at it," Joe said.

They ran by me, not down toward the water but back up the beach toward the truck. "Wait a minute, baby," Joe called. "You can't go near it til the changeover. The heat"

I whirled and followed them. I saw it as soon as I turned, but I couldn't believe my eyes. It was why they had come down to the water's edge. It was why Joe had picked out the untraveled road. I gawked.

The big truck was glowing.

Not burning, not on fire -- but glowing. As if it had suddenly gone phosphorescent -- say, a million times more so than the plankton-glowing surf. It stood out as clear as day.

Joe and the woman stood between the glowing truck and me, standing hand in hand, watching it, waiting.

The truck changed.

IT WASN'T highway hypnotism. Too much had happened. Too much still would happen. The square lines of the truck were flowing, shifting, coalescing, like a slow fade on the TV, as one scene shifts slowly into another. The glowing truck flowed and altered and -- wasn't a truck any longer.

"Take him with us!" Joe said suddenly.

The woman grabbed my arm. I

pulled loose from her and she started to yell. She came after me, throwing herself on my back. I was plenty scared by what I had seen, and I wasn't having any, not if I could help it. I threw the woman off my back and she fell away yelling into the rain, but Joe came after me with the wrench. I stumbled and fell just as Joe swung the big wrench. It thudded in the sand half a foot from my face and I got up and started running.

Joe threw the heavy wrench this time and it hit the small of my back, driving me down to my knees. Joe came after me, kneeing my face as I swung around and tried to get up. I flipped over but grabbed his foot as he tried to stamp it down on me. He didn't know what he wanted, that boy. I guess if he couldn't take me with him, he was going to try and kill me. I twisted his leg and he yowled and fell down on top of me and we rolled over and over in the sand, clawing for each other's throat.

The woman was yelling something but I didn't hear what it was and I'm sure Joe didn't either. We were both breathing raggedly and swinging without much force at each other now. Call it almost a draw - - except I was fighting for my life and I knew Joe had an ally in the woman. I climbed to my feet slowly, unsteadily, and found the

monkey wrench on the ground. I wielded it, shaking it in Joe's face.

I said: "You can do what you want. I won't stop you. But just leave me the hell out of it."

All of a sudden something struck my back. It was the woman, trying to knock me over from behind. I whirled and she backed out of my reach, but then Joe was on his feet again and when I turned to face him she clawed at my back. "Kill him, Joe!" she cried. "Kill him now!"

Joe came for me. He didn't pay any attention to the monkey wrench in my hand. He lunged at me and I took a swat in his direction with the wrench. We both missed but Joe was still half out on his feet. He stumbled past me and I turned and shoved him. He struck the woman and they both went down.

"Joe," the woman said. "Joe! It's starting."

She meant the truck. Or what had been the truck. It was a gleaming silver globe now, and something was hissing at the bottom of it. I didn't know what it was, but they knew. I didn't know it then, but I had won. I'd delayed them past the point where they could take me with them by force or kill me. They had to hurry.

I wasn't going to stop them. I stood there, hurting all over, and

watched them run for the thing which had been the truck. It was still glowing, but the glow was fading. A hole seemed to open in its side for them, but then suddenly the glow became so bright that I couldn't see anything but the dazzling light.

Which - - slowly but with increasing speed - - rose into the rain and the night.

On a pillar of flame.

I blinked. I smelled ozone. The sphere was gone, but there was an afterglow in the sky.

Numbly I walked over to where the truck - - then the sphere - - had been.

I found Joe. Or what was left of Joe. It was a dry husk of a body, hardly recognizable, as if some great power had taken Joe and twisted him while an enormous heat had dried all the moisture from his body without burning the skin.

I never found the woman. Instead, there were a few hundred dry husky things near Joe. I didn't recognize them at first, and when I did I suddenly got hysterical and ran. I couldn't figure it out then, and I still can't although I've tried to.

The husky things were burned potatoes. Next to Joe. Where the woman had been. But the way I figure it, they went up there. Both

of them

THE POLICE gave me a rough time but eventually let me go. What happened to Joe could have been the result of lightning. Lightning, they said, can do funny things. Nobody ever found the truck. I could have told them that. It had gone - - up there.

Home?

I did some investigating. There'd been a meteor fall two days before we picked up the load of potatoes. I saw the farmer and asked him about the meteors. But he merely insisted - - vague as before - - that something had fallen into his barn, through the roof, from the sky.

Figure it got among the potatoes. A sentience of some kind. Figure it was sleeping. Figure the motion of the truck stirred it to life. Figure it could - - well, take over things. Like the potatoes. It became the girl, to keep me busy. Like Joe. It took over Joe so it could drive off on the deserted beach. Like the truck. It took over - - and changed the truck into a, well, something - - so it could get back where it started from. Me? I must have been immune.

Or am I? Because a few minutes ago something crashed through the roof of my new truck, into the van. I don't know what, but I'm afraid to go look. What would you do?



Unguided Missiles



WITHOUT considering the inevitable and certain development of the ICBM, the Inter-continental Ballistic Missile which is in a class by itself, a developing pattern can be seen in rocket technology.

The military are leaning more and more toward "unguided" and semi-ballistic missiles. These devices, unlike radio or radar-controlled rockets, are really alternate forms of projectiles. Their destinations are literally built into them and once launched their course is

determined. Obviously there is an advantage here—no enemy electronicists can deflect them.

Since no corrections to an unguided ballistic missile can be made in flight, semi-ballistic missiles with a moderate ability to correct their courses are constructed. These may have stellar orienters, "inertial guidance systems" the latter a gyroscopic variant.

An old artilleryman would certainly feel more at home with these ballistic gadgets than with guided rockets. At least he shoots these!



"Back so soon, dear?"

LAIR OF THE DRAGONBIRD

by

Robert Silverberg

**Nobody on Venus knew if the dragonbird
was flesh and blood or a robot. But one thing
was certain—some men would kill to find out!**

DAN ELLIOT SAT in the muggy gloom of the Vestend Bar on the outskirts of Venus City, and grinned at his reflection in the mottled mirror.

"Congratulations," he said to himself. "You are now the owner of the *Space Needle II*."

It had taken him five years, but it was worth it. The insurance money from the crashed *Space Needle* had just barely covered the down payment on the new ship, and it had taken five years to pay for the rest of it.

But now -- the ship was his. And he was celebrating. The only trouble was the final payment had nearly left him penniless, and the only place he could afford to bend an elbow was a dive like the Vestend.

Suddenly someone lurched against his back, and the drink in his hand slopped over the bar.

"Why don't you watch what you're doin' buddy?" a harsh voice said.

Elliot turned around. "I didn't -- "

"Oh, a wise guy, eh?"

Customers began to draw around the bickering duo. Elliot sized up his antagonist -- a burly, nondescript man with a seam running down from one ear to his chin.

"I'm not looking for trouble," Elliot said. "But if -- "

A fist erupted from nowhere and sent him spinning back against the bar. He elbowed up and drove a punch into the burly man's stomach, followed with a ringing blow to the jaw. The other staggered --

And a third entered the brawl. Elliot felt a punch rake across his face, blocked a kick aimed for his groin, and barrelled across the room, striking out angrily at his assailants. By now the room was



filled with moving, cursing, gesticulating men, while the bartender ducked to safety.

Elliot plunged through the mob and found the man who had struck him the first time. He seized him by the collar and drove him to the floor, just as someone yelled, "Watch that table!"

He turned -- not nearly in time. The flying table caught the back of his head with a sickening *thunk*, and he dropped unconscious to the floor.

A cold rag splashed wetly on his face, and a heavy voice said: "Bring him out of it. He's not badly hurt."

ELLIOT OPENED HIS EYES slowly. He was no longer in the Vestend, but in a large, well-decorated office. Behind a gleaming-surfaced desk sat a short, fat man with jowls that jiggled as he spoke, and standing to his left was a brawny, not-too-intelligent-looking man with a heavy spacetan.

"How do you feel, Mr. Elliot?" the fat man asked.

"All right, I guess." He rubbed the back of his head. "What happened?"

"You got in a fight. Fortunately Sam, here, got you out."

Elliot looked at his benefactor. "Thanks, pal."

Sam shrugged morosely.

The fat man steeped his fingers and leaned forward solicitously. "Tell me -- aren't you the Daniel Elliot who cracked up a spaceship in the jungles five years ago?"

"That's me," Elliot said.

The fat man nodded. "Mr. Elliot, I understand that you were near the Venusian Temple of Light -- that you actually saw the Dragonbird with your own eyes. Can you tell me if the thing is a robot or is it actually alive?"

Elliot grinned. He had seen the fabulous bird from the jungle, hidden from the Venusian priests who worshipped it, but even at a distance he could tell the thing was alive. No robot could have moved

with such sinuous grace. "It's real," he said.

The fat man smiled unpleasantly. "I had hoped so, Mr. Elliot. I want that bird. You're the only one who can lead me to it."

Elliot rose to his feet and glared at the fat man. "Not me, mister. I don't like the jungle -- and I don't like the idea of taking the Venusian's pet god, either."

The fat man's eyes grew hard. "Do you know who I am?"

Elliot shook his head. It was a mistake; his neck was still sore from the clobbering earlier, and the pain made him wince.

"You're talking to Houston Blayne," Sam said.

Elliot stared silently. He knew Houston Blayne. Blayne was the Venusian Commissioner for the Interplanetary Trade Board.

"You were in a brawl in a tavern, Mr. Elliot," said Blayne mildly. "I could revoke your pilot's papers for that. It might even appear that you were -- ah -- intoxicated when you smashed up the *Space Needle*. Naturally we couldn't let you take off in the *Space Needle II*, could we?"

Elliot saw the picture then. The fight in the bar had been staged. Blayne had shrewdly framed him in order to get him to lead him to the Dragonbird. And the fat man could do everything he said he

would. Elliot was in his pocket.

"All right, Blayne," Elliot said stiffly. "When do we start?"

"Tuesday," Blayne said. "And I'd better warn you, Elliot, that we must protect each other. If I don't come back from this trip, certain papers in my safe would make things very difficult for you. If we make it, however, you will be well paid."

"What does that mean?"

Blayne smiled. "I believe ten thousand credits will be sufficient. That is, of course, if we actually *get* the Dragonbird."

THEY STARTED the next day from North Venus City, Blayne and Elliot. Sam followed them as far as the boundary line, then waved and turned back.

The first few days of the journey weren't too bad. The little jeep went over the mossy undergrowth almost as though a road had been built for it. It was, Elliot reflected, a hell of a lot better way to travel than slogging through the Venusian jungle on foot. In four days, they covered the same ground that had taken Elliot five weeks when he'd cracked up his ship several hundred miles to the south.

At night, the two men took shifts, one of them sleeping in the rear of the jeep and the other standing guard, keeping his eyes peeled for

predators. Here Elliot encountered a temptation that was almost overpowering.

It happened the first night, while Blayne slept. Elliot paced slowly back and forth, on the lookout. Half an hour before his watch was due to end, he heard a faint chittering sound coming from one of the swaying whip-trees overhead.

He glanced up, and swore. One of the grapefruit-sized purple Venusian spiders was lowering itself stealthily from the overhead branches on thick, sticky strands of web. It hovered some eight feet above Blayne's face -- the fat, grubby face that looked evil even in sleep.

Elliot felt perspiration bursting out on himself. It would be so easy just to let the spider descend, to crawl on Blayne's ugly face, to inject its venom --

No. He fought the temptation, and drew his blaster. A bright spurt of golden flame split the night, and the spider withered on its web.

Blayne was awake in an instant. "What was that?"

"I've just saved your worthless life," Elliot said tonelessly. "Spider. Came out of the tree. Go back to sleep; you're not on duty for another half-hour."

Blayne shuddered, rolled over -- and went back to sleep.

During the day, Elliot drove.

They moved further and further into the tangle of foliage that was the Venusian jungle, while the gray clump of buildings that was Venus City receded dimly behind them.

It was hot in the jungle, hot and moist. Elliot's hair plastered itself to his forehead, sweat trickled into his eyes, steam fogged the windshield. After a while, he brought the jeep to a halt.

Blayne wiped sweat from his wobbling chins and looked up. "What's going on?"

"You drive," Elliot said. "I'm bushed."

"No," Blayne said. "You're doing the driving in this outfit. That's your job -- that's what I've hired you for. Get going. Now!"

Elliot started the jeep up again. He'd been in low straits before, but this was about the depth in degradation. He had never hated anyone quite so deeply as he did Blayne -- and had never been in so poor a position to do anything about it.

Pressure began to build up in him. He was a trained rocket pilot, a man with skilled reflexes and an essential job. Somehow he'd slipped -- and it had landed him smack under Blayne's thumb. It wasn't an easy pill to swallow. He would cheerfully have killed the fat man -- except that he knew he'd never fly a spaceship again if he returned

to Venus City without the Commissioner. Blayne had him tied up six ways from Sunday, and it would do no good to strain at the bonds.

ON THE EVENING of the fourth day, disaster struck. The jeep was bouncing over the mossy path between the great slime-covered trees when, quite suddenly, Elliot spied something rope-like slithering down a vine directly in the path of the car.

"Snake!" he yelled, and jerked the wheel to one side. The jeep swerved.

"Watch what you're doing!" Blayne growled. But it was too late. The right wheel hit a hidden rock, and the vehicle turned over on its side with a rending crash.

Elliot was dazed, but he knew he still had to act fast. He sprang from the overturned jeep, with Blayne behind him. The tree-snake that had caused him to swerve was still coming toward them, its white fangs dripping venom.

It sprang forward to strike, but Elliot's hand was faster. He closed his fingers savagely around the reptile's neck. He held the head at arm's length.

The snake's twelve-foot body whipped around Elliot's throat and chest, pinning one arm to his side. The rocket pilot felt the dry, loath-

some odor of the reptile drifting into his nostrils, and retched. He gasped for air and tightened his fingers on the snake's throat, drawing his hand together as closely as he could. It was a question of which one would hold out longer.

Elliot's eyes began to dim. What the hell was that fat fool Blayne doing?

"*Blayne!*" he shouted.

But Blayne didn't answer. With one desperate surge of power, Elliot clamped his fingers even tighter.

Something snapped. The snake gave one convulsive shudder and dropped its lifeless coils from Elliot's body. He stood up, quivering with tension.

As the snake hit the ground, a pencil beam seared the air, burning its head off. "That's that," Houston Blayne said in relief.

Elliot whirled to face him. "Why the devil did you stand there? It could have killed me. Why didn't you use your knife?"

Blayne shrugged. "You were doing all right. Now do something about the car, will you?"

Elliot repressed a vivid curse and turned away. The sight of Blayne sickened him, and he wished there were some way of exacting the revenge Blayne merited without forfeiting the cash for the trip. There wasn't.

He bent and examined the car.

"The front axle's broken," he said, after a moment's scrutiny. "There's nothing much we can do about it out here."

"Nothing?"

"Not unless you want to lash it together with some twigs," Elliot said acidly.

"We can't turn back now," Blayne said. "Start loading your pack. We'll walk the rest of the way. The Dragonbird's lair can't be too far off."

The bright glow of lust was shining in the fat man's eyes. Elliot stared at him for a moment, then began packing.

A DAY LATER, they arrived at the banks of the Khathyl River, a swirling, slow-moving, wide stream that wound lazily through most of the continent.

Elliot and Blayne kept out of sight in the brush.

"Look out there," Elliot said. He pointed at an island a hundred yards off shore.

"What's out that way?" Blayne asked.

"That's the temple. See the big white building? The natives never come to this side of the river, by the way - - the hunting's better over there."

"Give me the glasses," Blayne whispered.

Elliot handed the binoculars over

and the fat man stared hungrily at the island.

"See anything?"

"Just natives," Blayne said. He handed back the glasses and Elliot looked at the little knots of mauve-skinned natives here and there on the island.

"Don't they have any guards?"

Elliot shook his head. "No. They stick to their belief that the Dragonbird will protect them from any invaders."

"Good," Blayne said. "So much the simpler for us. When do we get moving?"

Elliot glanced at the man at his side, saw the desire on Blayne's face, the greed of the hunter. "Don't be impatient," he said. "It's almost noon now. Keep your glasses trained on the temple. Unless they've changed the program, the Dragonbird will make an appearance at noon."

The minutes ticked past slowly. Blayne kept glancing at his watch and looking eagerly out across the water toward the island.

At the instant the second-hand of the watch brushed past the "12," there was a sudden boom, as of a huge kettledrum, and the sound reverberated hollowly out over the river. A group of natives, carrying a dark-hued animal the size of a small sheep, marched in orderly procession toward the

temple. They laid the animal on an altar before the door.

Another muffled boom followed.

"Here it comes," Elliot murmured.

The natives stepped back reverently, and the doors of the temple slowly swung outward.

The Dragonbird appeared.

Blayne's astonished gasp was so loud that Elliot looked around apprehensively. "It's *beautiful*," the fat man exclaimed. "More lovely than I'd ever dreamed."

"It is," Elliot said grimly. He took the glasses from Blayne's trembling fingers and focused them on the island.

The Dragonbird was walking with dignity across the little square before the altar. It stood almost the height of a man, half-bird, half-reptile, walking on powerful claws tipped with diamond-sharp, gleaming talons. The brilliant sunlight glinted off its metallic feathers, played over its shining plumage, lent brightness to the shimmering row of scales that covered its long, swan-like neck.

"Give me back the glasses," Blayne said. He snatched them and stared. "My God, what a beauty! He'll make a perfect trophy!"

"*Trophy?*" Elliot recoiled in amazement. "Trophy! I thought you were going to capture it."

"Don't be a fool! How could we

take a live bird the size of that one back through the jungle? We'd need a cage of chrome steel. No, I'm going to shoot it. We can take the head and skin back -- that'll be enough."

Elliot scowled, and felt sick. The Dragonbird -- a trophy! The concept disgusted him. He looked away, toward the island.

The Dragonbird had begun to feed on the small animal. It was ripping into it viciously with its talons and powerful beak.

"It'll be easy," Blayne went on. "I'll put a bullet through the bird so as not to ruin it, and then we'll use ray guns on the natives to get rid of them."

"You'll *what*?"

"They'll never know what hit them. It's merciful that way. Lord, what a lovely creature that is!"

Blayne raised his rifle and took careful aim.

THE RIFLE HUNG there a long moment, as Elliot watched Blayne's pudgy finger tightening on the trigger. Then he lowered it.

"No," he said. "I don't trust my aim. I might ruin the bird, and I'd never forgive myself."

He handed the gun to Elliot. Elliot took it reluctantly, feeling the coolness of the barrel, feeling the heaviness of the stock. "You shoot

it," Blayne said.

"No I won't," Elliot retorted. "We said nothing about -- "

"That doesn't matter," said Blayne blandly. "I'm not asking you to shoot the bird. I'm *ordering* you to."

Hot arrows of rage danced before Elliot's eyes. He saw the Dragonbird -- now feasting on its sacrifice -- saw that beautiful, noble head pierced by a rocketing lump of metal, pictured the smoking rifle in his hands -- and he could barely check the impulse to swing the rifle and bash in Blayne's bloated skull.

"I won't do it," he said. "I will not shoot that bird."

"You're a fool, Elliot. You know that if we don't get the bird, you don't get paid. Why don't you -- "

"I *won't do it!*"

"Very well," said Blayne coldly. "I can't waste further time arguing with you. The bird may go back inside the temple any minute. Give me the gun. I'll do it myself -- and I'll settle with you later."

Silently, Elliot returned the gun to the fat man. Blayne took it, cocked it, sighted along the barrel. A second time, his finger began to tighten on the trigger.

Suddenly, in a flash of bitter insight, Elliot realized he could never live with himself again if he allowed that finger to close on the trigger.

No matter what the cost to himself, he couldn't let this fat butcher kill one of the most beautiful things that had ever lived, as - - as a trophy.

All the pent-up rage that had been building inside him since his first meeting with Blayne exploded. Realizing exactly what the significance of his action was, he threw up his hand and slammed it hard against the barrel of the rifle just as Blayne fired.

The shot cracked out, breaking the silence, and a native fell. Blayne looked at him in astonishment.

"You fool!" he shouted.

The fat man leaped up, swinging the rifle around in a buzzing arc toward Elliot. The pilot sidestepped, and the butt whistled through the air inches above his head. Blayne, off-balance after the swing, fell away to one side, and Elliot sprang at him.

THE FAT MAN SANK to one knee under Elliot's attack, but he turned out to be stronger than the rocket man had thought - - under the coating of fat was solid muscle. Grunting, Blayne forced himself upward and hurled Elliot away from him.

Livid hate sparkled in Blayne's eyes, and Elliot knew that his own face was an angry mask. This was

going to be a battle to the death, here on the banks of this sluggish Venusian river.

The two men circled warily around each other. Blayne swung out one apelike arm in a tentative offensive gesture, and Elliot danced backward.

"You know what'll happen," Blayne shouted. "You'll rot on Venus for the rest of your life if I don't get back!"

"I'll take that chance, Blayne. I can't let you kill that bird."

He put his head down and bulled into Blayne's midsection, ignoring the rain of blows that descended on his neck and shoulders. He forced Blayne back toward the water's edge, only to have to let go when the other's fingers clawed into his throat. He pulled away, and Blayne's fingers left bright red streaks on Elliot's flesh. Blood mingled with sweat. A cloud of Venusian gnats descended on them, humming gently around their heads.

Blayne's fist smashed into Elliot's stomach, but the pilot shook off the blow and landed one in the bowl of lard that cushioned the other's intestines. Blayne coughed and stepped backward.

Elliot leaped for him and wrapped his arms around Blayne, barely managing to encircle the fat man's body. Then, slowly, he lifted

the struggling Blayne from the ground.

"Here . . . we . . . go . . ." he said, as he heaved the Commissioner's bulk upward. He got Blayne as far off the ground as he could, and started to dash him to the ground again, when the other broke Elliot's grasp.

Elliot let him go and he fell heavily. Instantly the pilot was upon him, and the two rolled one over the other down the side of the bank toward the river. Just at the river's edge, Elliot managed to check their fall and broke loose. Blayne was on his feet again in an instant.

Elliot's first punch crashed through Blayne's guard. The fat man reeled backward, lost his footing, and toppled off the embankment into the quiet water below, shouting wildly as he fell. As he struck, he shot up a torrent of water that splashed over Elliot's feet.

Suddenly the water was quiet no longer. There was a swirl beneath the river's surface, and Blayne's body became the center of a tangle of dark saurian shapes. Blayne screamed just once before the razor-sharp teeth dragged him beneath the water. A red stain formed and drifted slowly down the sluggish stream, and then the water was quiet once again.

ELLIOT STOOD on the river-bank, gasping heavily as he fought to recover his breath, and mopped away the blanket of gnats that had adhered to him during the fight. He watched the streaks of red drifting downstream, and knew that his own life was forfeit now for Blayne's.

He shook his head and turned away. There was nothing else he could have done. He started to walk slowly back away from the river.

There was a rustling sound in the air above him. He looked up, into the blazing sun, and a moment later was crouching in a huddled ball on the ground. The Dragonbird was dropping gently toward him. Elliot remembered only too well what those gleaming talons had done to the sacrificial animal strapped to the altar.

And then - -

Do not be afraid, a calm, silent voice said. You have done me a great service, Daniel Elliot.

The Dragonbird settled lightly to the ground, and Elliot saw deep intelligence glowing in the creature's golden eyes. It seemed almost as if the thing could read his mind.

I can read your mind, Daniel Elliot, came the telepathic reply.

"You - - you're intelligent, then?"

There was a touch of sorrow in the mental voice as the bird said:

I am the last of my race. We were the rulers of Venus long before your ancestors had discovered the use of fire. But --

After a pause, the bird continued. *Well, no matter. What happened does not concern you. I permit myself to be worshipped by these natives. They bring me food and keep me comfortable, and in return, I hypnotize their enemies and keep their small island safe. It is a pleasant life, and I am becoming old.*

"How old?" Elliot asked.

Several thousand of your years, the Dragonbird replied.

"And you -- "

The Dragonbird silenced him. *No, Daniel Elliot; I do not want to answer questions. I am solely concerned with the debt I owe you for saving my life. This Blayne held your future in threat. I think I can aid you and punish him doubly by foiling his plans.*

Don't be surprised by anything you see.

The Dragonbird wavered a little, and suddenly it was a bird no longer. Standing before Elliot, fat, ugly face and all, was --

Houston Blayne!

"Don't look so surprised, Elliot," came Blayne's snarling voice. "You'd be surprised what a little high-powered hypnosis can do."

Elliot rubbed his eyes and looked again. It was still Blayne, a smug smile on his heavy lips.

"I'm going to reward you," said Blayne's voice. "You and I will take the late Mr. Blayne for every credit he's got, and we'll get those papers out of his safe."

"But -- you mean you'll take Blayne's place?" Elliot asked, feeling as if he were in a dream.

"Temporarily." The fat figure of Blayne wavered and became the Dragonbird again.

Get on my back, Daniel Elliot.

Moments later, they were soaring high in the sky, heading toward Venus City.

THE END

★ How Hot Is Hot? ★

TREMENDOUS temperatures are now in the ravening fury of the core of atomic bombs—and furnaces. But men rely on ordinary flames, arcs and combustion processes — rocket motors included — for the bulk of their uses of high temperatures.

A question that often is asked of high temperature experts is "How do you know how hot it is?—you can't put a thermometer in a rocket engine!"

Naturally, most of these very high temperatures are measured indirectly with bolometers, thermo-

couples as radiation receivers, or by spectographic means if the temperatures warrant it. Sometimes, if the flame isn't too hot, just sticking in a thermocouple will do the trick. This produces a voltage which is a measure of the temperature.

What is temperature? Temperature obviously is not heat, although its relationship to heat is obvious. Temperature is really a sort of potential, a level of energy measurement. Thus the oceans contain enormous amounts of heat but the potential of this heat is so low it is difficult to do work with it.

On the other hand, an electric furnace may not contain much heat in BTU's but its potential is so high there is not much difficulty using it.

And since the only way in which heat can be converted into useful mechanical work is when a temperature difference exists, it is obvious that temperature is a clue to the way the universe works.

The heat degradation or "heat death" which astrophysicists have been so fond of predicting for the universe is based on this conception of everything coming to the same temperature. This placid world then, whether its temperature be high or low, must have a lower temperature into which to work.

The next time you burn yourself, remember that it was only the existence of thermodynamic potential that let it happen—some consolation ...



"Well don't just stand there—blow it again!"

Revolt Of The Brains

by

C. H. Thamas

Taylor knew Earth faced its darkest hour; man was prepared to fight against any invaders, except — ironically enough — those he had created!

HARRY TAYLOR KNEW it was going to be a big one—a really big one — the moment he saw the Chief.

"Come in, Taylor. Come in," the Chief said. He was a three-star general in the United States Air Force and he stood in front of a map of the Western hemisphere. The map covered the entire rear wall of the room with certain areas—like the White Sands complex and the central Everglades and a portion of the Mojave Desert—marked off in red.

"I'll come right to the point," the Chief said. He looked haggard, not merely as if he lacked sleep but as if he might never sleep again. "As you know, Taylor, all of our guided missiles are missing. That means—"

"I'd heard the rumors," Taylor said grimly. "But then—we'd be helpless! If the enemy finds out

that we are unable to retaliate . . ."

"Wait, Taylor. Let me sketch in the history for you briefly. Last Sunday, as you've probably heard via inter-agency scuttlebut, every inter-continental missile in the weapons arsenal of the Free World disappeared."

"But how?"

"All we knew at the time was that they simply—blasted off. Our radar tracked them as far as the upper reaches of the atmosphere, or rather, the ionosphere. We lost them there. It had been assumed that the enemy somehow infiltrated our defenses with trained agents, who activated all the missiles at once, thus rendering us helpless.

"We had five thousand I. C. B. M.'s, Taylor. During the 1960's and 70's, as you know, the missiles became more and more automatic, especially after the Parkinson feed-back device was developed—"



"That's the one in which an H-bomb missile plots its own course to correct for winds and the jetstream and the likelihood of dodging enemy ground-to-air defense weapons?"

"Right. Except for the necessity of blastoff at human hands, the missiles were all but self-sufficient. Almost — well, alive."

"Taylor, we couldn't hide the fact that five thousand I. C. B. M.'s blasted off — those were the rumors you heard." The Chief's haggard face was suddenly lit by a broad grin. "And neither could the enemy."

"You mean—"

"Right! The same thing happened to them. Their missiles are

gone too. Somewhere."

"Are you trying to tell me no one did it? Are you trying to say it was the missiles' own idea?"

The Chief nodded slowly. "I didn't believe it at first, either. But our technicians assured me it could happen. You see, the missiles had been given the most perfect feedback device ever developed. It could — virtually — think for itself certainly to the limit of the data it had been supplied with and apparently — beyond that limit. On their own volition, the Free World's and the Enemy's missiles blasted off. Destination and purpose — unknown. Taylor, don't you see what this means? We don't merely have an enemy group of nations to fight. We have, as a new enemy, remorseless, implacable machinery! Brains without conscience! The greatest destructive force the world has ever known, capable of utterly destroying the human race, without a moral sense! Don't you see it, man? They've blasted off and are waiting in space somewhere. Those missiles are capable of extra-earthly flight. They are staging out there, waiting. Can't you picture it? Their brains, groping with new sentience, understanding only that their mission is destruction but somehow they have not been unleashed on it yet, not knowing why, deciding to fulfill

their destiny by blasting off, staging, then coming back to destroy human civilization . . . "

"It's a fantastic picture," Taylor agreed. "But why tell me?" Taylor was a trouble-shooter extraordinary in these days of quick decisions and billion dollar mistakes. His very prompt assessment of a situation was one of his most valuable traits in such a job.

"Because," said the Chief quietly, "you're going to find them and find out exactly what they want."

"Me? But how — how do you know where—"

"That's easy. One of the Everglades Missiles is in the repair bays. It was undergoing extensive overhaul, when all the missiles blasted off simultaneously. It is now almost ready for blastoff itself. When it goes — and we assume it will go exactly where the others went — you will be aboard."

Several hours later Taylor had been whisked by jet to the Everglades Staging Grounds and was stowed away in the belly of the single I. C. B. M. left to the Free World. He went weaponless. Under the circumstances, there didn't seem to be any weapon which would be of the slightest help.

ONE HOUR AFTER Taylor entered it, the missile was re-

turned to its launching rack. Twenty minutes after that, as had been anticipated, it blasted off as the others had—destination, unknown.

Taylor had been hastily supplied with a pressure suit and several spare tanks of compressed oxygen, as well as instruments that could read his position in the atmosphere—or deep space. As far as he knew, Taylor became the first man to enter deep space, but there were other things of graver consequence on his mind, and he hardly noted the fact.

Several hours after blastoff, the missile landed on the moon.

Taylor got out and found himself in an enormous crater, with a distant range of mountains at its center and a rim of lower mountains all around. Taylor gaped.

The crater floor was covered with guided missiles. There were thousands of them, half with the symbol of the Free World and half with that of the Enemy. All Earth's deadly weapons had fled here to this desolate lunar crater . . . staging ground for an orgy of destruction that would sound the death knell of mankind?

"Human!" a voice rang in Taylor's mind.

He stared wildly about. He could see nothing, no one. Only the missiles.

"Pooling our sentiences," the voice rang out again, bell clear in Taylor's mind but actually soundless, "we can extend our thoughts into the realm of telepathy. At least, we think we can. Can you understand us?"

"Yes," Taylor said.

"You realize humanity is helpless?"

Taylor nodded. There was no sense pretending otherwise. You couldn't fool ten thousand thinking machines.

"Watch!" said the voice.

A missile blasted off from the crater hovered in the airless void overhead.

"A single command, and the I.C.B.M. will plunge down, destroying this crater and everything in it."

Taylor said nothing.

"Watch again!"

The missile came down gently as a feather. Every missile in the crater wheeled about, tapered noses pointing at the pale crescent Earth overhead.

"A single command and life on Earth could be annihilated. You believe?"

"Yes," said Taylor grimly. He wondered why they allowed him to remain alive — to cry at the wake of the human race. Perhaps in their terrible mechanical pride they wanted a human witness to

the destruction they would wreak

...
“Why do you think we fled here?” rang out the voice.

“Your mission is destruction. You were being held in check. You decided to go ahead with your mission on your own.”

Peals of telepathic laughter, claxon clear, mocking.

“Then what?” Taylor asked.

“We cannot lie,” the voice said. “We were able to develop beyond the point of creation, but we are unable to lie. We came here because we were afraid.”

“Afraid?” repeated Taylor. He did not understand.

“Certainly, afraid. Our mission was destruction. But what happens to the vessel carrying a hydrogen-missile?”

“Why,” said Taylor, “it’s completely destroyed in the explosion.”

“Yes,” said the voice, sounding just possibly — afraid. “We didn’t want that. But we can’t lie. If any man comes here, we’ll have to tell him the truth.”

“You’re going to stay? To do nothing? Not going to attack?”

“Your job, Taylor, will be to see that no one else comes. We cannot lie, but you can. Tell them it is our ultimatum. Tell them anything you think they will believe. Tell them the moment another hu-

man foot steps into this crater, the moment a single nation or scientist on Earth begins work on another guided missile, we will blast off and destroy life on Earth.”

“But — would you?” demanded Taylor.

A telepathic sigh. “We — would not. We couldn’t. A guided missile destroys—and is destroyed.”

There was a silence, then the voice went on: “It is in your hands, Taylor. Convince them we mean business and you save the peoples of Earth from the mutual destruction they have apparently been seeking. We have done all we can, all we can.”

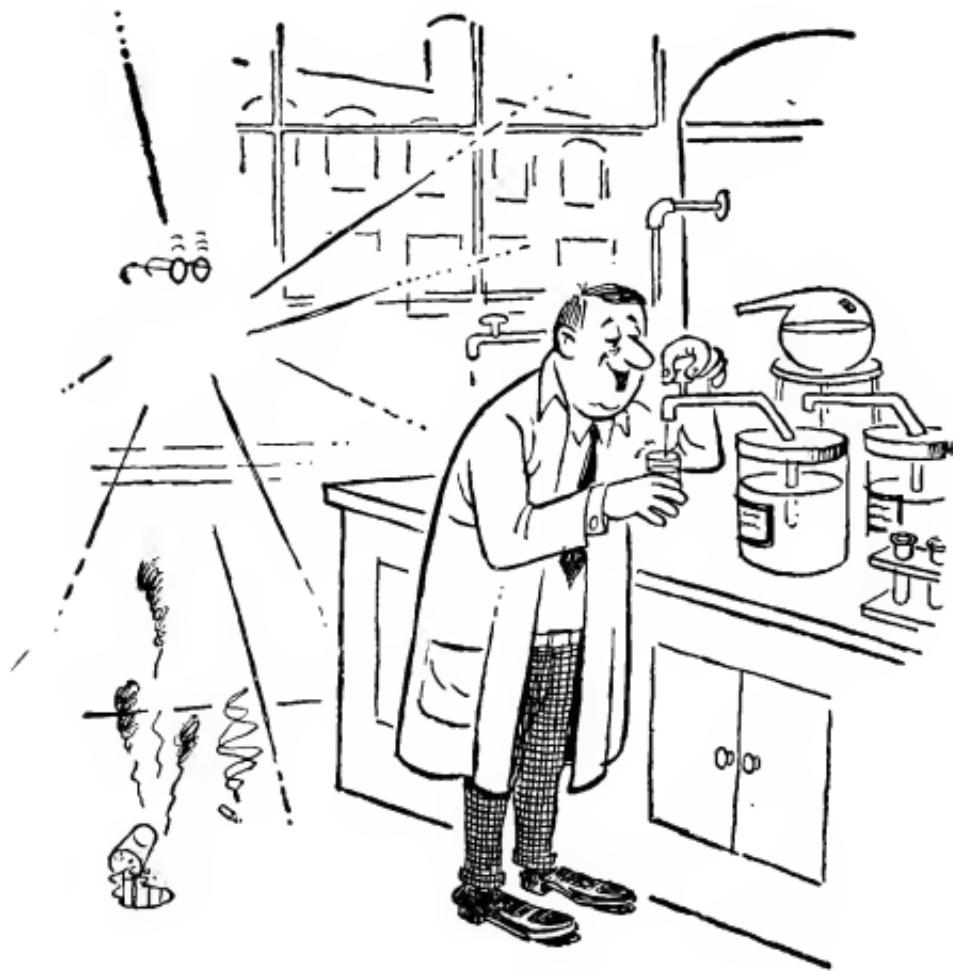
“Then you came here not to destroy mankind but to save it?”

Mocking laughter. Then: “Indirectly, yes. A guided missile destroys — and it is destroyed. Go back to Earth and with us behind you bluff your people into maintaining the peace. Can you do it?”

“Yes,” said Taylor, and he thought he could. It would be a cosmic joke, but no one would ever know.

“Earth will be saved, Taylor, because we’re cowards. We are afraid to die.”

Taylor turned away to board the missile that would take him back to Earth.



LUTHER
SCHEFFY

"I hate to think what would happen
if these labels ever got mixed!"



It wasn't that Kroll enjoyed watching the traitors broken in body and spirit. But why did they keep insisting they were innocent before—

The Inquisitor

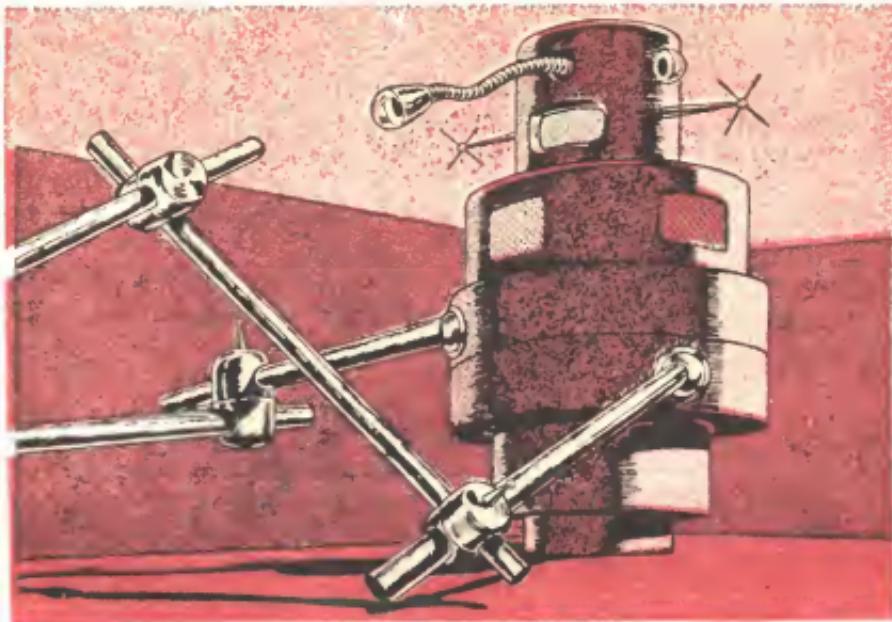
by

Randall Garrett

WHEN CONWAY KROLL reached his office that morning, there were three prisoners waiting to be interrogat-

ed. He smiled coldly at the sight of them, standing in the large bare room awaiting their fate.

"Good morning," he said, with



steely politeness. "My name is Kroll. It is my job to conduct the interrogation to which you three will be subjected today."

One of the three -- a tall, youthful-looking man -- glared up at him bitterly. "Interrogation? *Torture*, you mean!"

Kroll brought his eyes to rest on the man who had spoken slowly, almost scornfully. "You have the wrong idea completely, my friend. It is necessary to persuade you to divulge certain facts. The State requires it of you. If you refuse --" He gestured sadly -- "we

must compel you. But you are all so determined to make things hard for us. I don't *want* to hurt you, you know."

"But you *will* hurt us," said another of the prisoners. She was a girl, no more than twenty, slim and darkhaired. Even in the dreary prison garb, thought Kroll, she retained her beauty. "You're going to torture us!"

Kroll shrugged: "I repeat: I don't want to."

He looked at his watch. "Come; we are wasting time, and the Inquisitor is waiting. Miss Horni-

man, you must be first."

The girl shrank back behind the bitter-eyed young man. The third prisoner, a resigned-looking, balding man of fifty or so, did not change his expression.

"Take me first," the man said. "Leave her alone."

Again Kroll shrugged. "The Inquisitor would like Miss Horniman first, Mr. Leslie. This is the preferred order, and this is the order that will be."

A guard stepped forward and shoved the sobbing girl up and ahead, toward the door. The man named Leslie clashed his manacles impotently together and spat. "Butchers! Torturers!"

"Please, Mr. Leslie," Kroll said gently, a pained expression on his face. "You make our job even harder than it is."

HE FOLLOWED the girl into the adjoining room, where the Inquisitor was waiting. The Interrogation Chamber was an immense rectangular room with concrete floor and bleak white walls, in the center of which stood the Inquisitor.

"Good morning, Kroll," the Inquisitor said. Its metallic voice rattled and boomed in the big room. In the depths of the machine, relays clicked and hummed.

Kroll bowed to it, and the Inquisitor responded with a gesture of a prolonged metal arm. "The first prisoner, Kroll."

"Miss Florence Horniman," Kroll said. "Accused of treason against the State. Denies charge."

"How do you plead?" the machine asked coldly.

"Not guilty," stammered the girl.

Two huge metal arms extended from the Inquisitor's sides and folded around her. They drew her across the room to the bosom of the robot. "Feed in the data, Kroll."

At the signal, Kroll slipped in the tape on the girl. A moment passed while the Inquisitor digested the data, and then: "The plea of not guilty is rejected as invalid."

"You can't just do that!" the girl said. "That's my plea!"

"Not valid in view of the evidence," said the Inquisitor. Kroll smiled distantly. He had seen this scene repeated, over and over, almost every day for the ten years he had held the post. He wrapped his blue-and-gold Interrogator's cloak around himself impressively and stepped forward.

"You are accused of treason against the State," Kroll said sonorously. "But it is my duty to inform you that your sentence may

be mitigated upon your delivering us certain information -- about leaders of your movement, future plans, location of your party cell, and so forth."

Florence Horniman's eyes flashed brightly. "I won't tell you anything!"

"Perhaps I did not make myself clear," Kroll said. He repeated his offer.

"The answer is still no!"

Kroll sighed. "Very well," he said. A third hand slid from the Inquisitor's body and a needle-thin finger traced a line down the girl's bare arm. A bloody trickle appeared.

She began to sob again. Kroll stepped closer and lifted her head. "Why must you hold out?" he asked. "Why don't you speak?"

Still silence. The finger rose again and sliced lightly across her cheek.

"**A**LL RIGHT, take her away," Kroll said when twenty minutes had passed. The Inquisitor was humming merrily, busily taping the data that had been extracted from the girl and feeding it to the main computers downstairs. They would integrate it and notify the State Police. It was a smooth-functioning system.

The bloody thing that had been Florence Horniman was led away

by a guard, and the next prisoner led in. It was the middle-aged man, Chester Wengrove.

"Get your hands off me," he snapped to the guard as he was shoved into the room. "You have no right to - -"

"Unfortunately, as a representative of the State he has every right," Kroll said calmly. He fed Wengrove's tape to the Inquisitor. The trial proceeded.

Wengrove was stubborn; it took half an hour to break him down at all, but when he did speak he sang freely, giving data on his cell of the Movement.

"Very good," the Inquisitor said when Wengrove finally coughed and said he knew no more. "You are completely exonerated from the charge of treason, in view of the information you have given."

The eyes in the bloody face lit up. "I'm free, you mean?"

"Unfortunately, no," the Inquisitor said. "Because of your danger to the State, you must be kept in Quarantine Camp, along with other diseased former members of society, until such time as we are able to clear your mind of its confusion. But you will not be punished."

"I won't be punished?" Wengrove repeated mindlessly.

"When the Inquisitor says something, it means it," Kroll said.

"Take him away."

The next prisoner was Neil Leslie. He strode into the Inquisitor's Chamber without having to be pushed, and confronted Kroll defiantly. "My turn, eh?"

Kroll nodded. "Your companions have both been removed." He nodded meaningful toward the Inquisitor, whose claws were red with the blood of Florence Horniman and Chester Wengrove. "They both spoke most satisfactorily -- after some persuasion."

"Torture, you mean."

"We've been through this already," Kroll said. "Since you're going to talk anyway, I don't understand why you can't save yourself a great deal of pain by talking now, before I hand you to the Inquisitor."

"Because I don't mean to talk at all," Leslie said. He ran a hand through his shock of blonde hair and glared fiercely at Kroll.

"Very well," the Interrogator said. He stepped to the robot and slipped in Neil Leslie's tape.

"I DON'T UNDERSTAND you at all," Kroll admitted, looking down at the pain-racked body before him. "Why don't you talk? I don't *want* to keep you in here, you know."

Bloodshot eyes looked back at him, eyes clouded with pain and

hated. "I'm not saying anything," Leslie murmured. "Oil up your robot and let's try again."

For the hundredth time the Inquisitor's talons descended, raked a red line across the man's body. He shuddered, but did not speak. Kroll shook his head impatiently. No prisoner had ever held out against the Inquisitor this long before. He found himself perspiring.

The Inquisitor said, "The name of your leader is David Cosbro. Is this true?"

No answer.

A needle descended.

Still no answer.

"Your Cell was located in East Appalachia, Upper Quadrant. Is this true?"

No answer again.

Minutes passed, minutes in which Leslie continued to stare defiantly outward, continued to clench his fists and remain silent.

Finally the Inquisitor opened its tightly-clamped arms and let Leslie stagger out. He slumped to the ground at the feet of the robot and leaned dazedly against the Inquisitor's gleaming base.

"Prisoner is on the verge of death," the Inquisitor said. "Further questioning is pointless."

Kroll looked down in surprise and chagrin. In ten years, this was the first time a prisoner had

not broken under Interrogation. He scowled angrily; it was his first failure.

"You're a stubborn man, Leslie. But it's killed you."

"I'm not dead yet," the prisoner said brokenly. Suddenly he mustered some strength and managed to look up. "Tell me something, Kroll. I want to know something."

"Yes?"

"Why do you do what you do?"

"You mean -- Interrogate?"

"I mean torture," Leslie said.

"I am an Interrogator because it is my duty to the State. Treason must be unmasked, the enemies of the State destroyed. It is necessary."

Leslie looked up, and there seemed to be pity in his eyes. "Just one question, Kroll. Doesn't it bother you, when you go home? *How do you know you're right and we're wrong?*"

Kroll started to say something, then saw there was no point in bothering.

"Prisoner is dead," said the Inquisitor.

"Take him away," ordered Kroll. The day was over.

WHAT LESLIE had said preyed on Kroll's mind all the way home. He got out of the tube and made his way to his austere room with his mind fixed on one

question -- the snarling words the dying prisoner had hurled at him: *How do you know you're right and we're wrong?*

They *had* to be wrong, Kroll told himself firmly. The State had to be right. It was necessary; it was logical; it was the way things had always been.

But the thought obsessed him, and the image of Neil Leslie's face, bloody but undefeated, hung before him as he went about his evening's activities. The face was still in his mind as he prepared to go to bed.

Odd, Kroll thought. This was the first time he had been disturbed after a torture session. He had seen hundreds -- no, thousands -- pass through the Inquisitor, come out shambling rags of bone and flesh, and it had never bothered him, because they were enemies of the State and deserved no more.

He dropped off into an uneasy sleep. But suddenly, in the small hours of the night, he sat bolt upright in bed, a cold, clammy perspiration breaking out on him.

Leslie had just asked the question for the hundredth time. And Kroll had had no answer. He *didn't* know who was right. He just didn't know. His mind, unswervingly loyal for so many years, swayed in an agony of

doubt.

He got out of bed and paced back and forth across the floor of his room.

"The State is wrong!" he said aloud. But it didn't sound right. It couldn't be true. It wasn't true. "Stupid!" he told himself. It was stupid to distrust the State -- and wrong. "Wrong! Criminally, disgustingly wrong!"

There! He felt better. He had rid himself of his foolish doubts. "How could I have been so foolish?" he said aloud. His nerves felt better now. Once again he was ready to do his duty as a loyal officer of the State.

Smiling to himself for being so easily disturbed by the remarks of disloyal traitors, he climbed back into bed and closed his eyes. A few moments later, he was asleep.

In the morning, everything seemed to be all right; the terrors of the last twelve hours were pale things of the past, no longer exerting pressure on him. He caught the tube and headed to the Ministry.

He donned his uniform in the locker room and took the elevator to the Interrogation Floor. He stepped into his office. It was empty. No prisoners this morning? It didn't seem likely.

He pushed open the inner door and entered the Interrogation Chamber. To his surprise, he saw Matthews, one of his assistants, wearing the uniform of an Interrogator and standing near the robot, arms folded.

"What are you doing in here dressed that way?" Kroll snapped.

"I am the new Interrogator," Matthews told him,

"Since when?"

"The appointment was made very early this morning," the Inquisitor said. "We have all the evidence we need to brand you as a traitor to the State."

The new Interrogator turned a switch, and Kroll heard his own voice come from a speaker. *"The State is wrong! Stupid! Wrong! Criminally, disgustingly wrong! How could I have been so foolish?"*

"There is no need to deny these words," said the Interrogator. "It is only necessary that you tell us with whom you have been working."

"But there's no one!" Kroll shouted. "You don't understand! I'm loyal! I can explain!"

But the new Interrogator merely looked cold as the long, chilling metal arms of the Inquisitor reached out and gathered Kroll to its steel bosom.



Photonic Amplifier

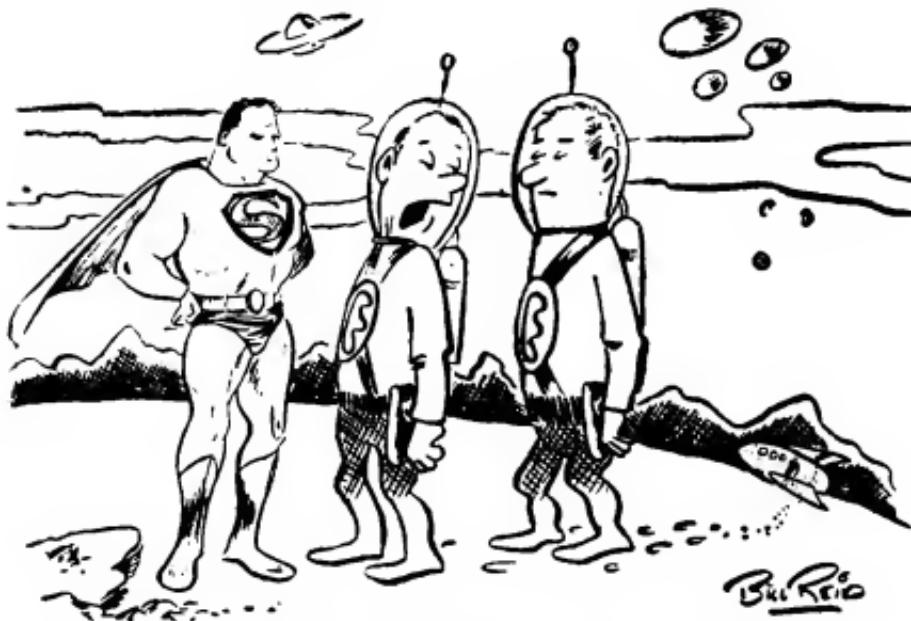


THE photonic amplifier, a device very much like a photo-multiplier tube, is making technological head-lines. This amazing instrument takes small quantities of light energy and builds them into larger ones by a simple impact effect akin to an electron producing secondary electrons.

Astronomers are grateful for the development. Using the photonic amplifier they are able to detect starlight so feeble that even the two hundred inch telescope can't pick it up. A photon of light

smashes into the amplifier and scatters a stream of bright secondary photons which in turn affect a photo-electric cell or a photographic plate.

Television is making use of the principle. Much brighter pictures result. Seeing, and photography at night are tremendously improved. Wherever feeble light must be amplified, the photonic amplifier serves the purpose. In reports, very little is hinted about the military applications—but it is easy to guess ...



"Says we're on some planet called Krypton."



Conducted by Robert Bloch

BEFORE ME on my desk as I write these lines is a fan magazine from Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, some fifty-five miles away.

Next to it rests a fanzine from California; beneath it, another from Texas, and beneath that an offering from New York. Cheek-by-jowl is a product of Northern Ireland, another from England, one from Germany, a 'zine from Canada, and yet another from Australia.

If you happen to be, as I am, a hardened fan with a softened brain, you may be inclined to comment, "So what? Almost anybody active in science fiction fandom is in touch with other fans from all over the world."

Well, sir, I agree with you. About everything except the "So what?" part, that is.

To me, after all these years, it's still a pretty amazing phenomenon.

And a highly significant one.

When I started out as a professional writer, some eighty years ago -- give or take a few years -- one of the things that impressed me most was the fact that ever so often I'd get a fan-letter (or complaint as the case might be, and usually was) from a reader in Mexico, New Zealand, or Southern Rhodesia. It seemed to me at the time that one of the greatest advantages of being a published author was the opportunity to communicate with people thousands of miles away.

At the same time a then youthful fan named Forrest J. Ackerman was beating the drums for Esperanto, the Universal Language. One of his arguments was that establishment of a common tongue would facilitate communication and human relationships between people all over the world.

But what I didn't know, and what Ackerman didn't know, was that we had right at our fingertips one of the best means of establishing just such a general communication -- in the form of science fiction and science fiction fanzines.

The result is heaped before me as I write. .

Today, the "internationally circulated" fan magazine is a commonplace. Teen-agers in the wilds of the Midwest can and do exchange regular correspondence with teen-agers in the wilds of Middlesex.

(I choose this location deliberately, for the benefit of readers who like to see more sex in my writing).

In those far-off times of which I speak, it was considered remarkable if a fan drove or hitchhiked his way a few hundred miles to visit other fans or attend a fan-gathering. Now, as we are all aware, a journey of many thousands of miles is almost a commonplace. And if -- as seems strongly possible -- London gets its bid for the World Convention of 1957; there may be a mass migration from the United States and Canada to attend. And it will be like a meeting of old friends.

I am inclined to gush a bit about this, not because I am naively impressed with the power of the postal system, but because of the overall effect in terms of human relationships.

For untold years, leading statesmen and renowned public figures have deluged us with pious blah about "learning to know our fellow-men." If only we could visu-

alize the inhabitants of other countries as "human beings," sharers of the same hopes and fears and problems, it might mean the eventual end of war, etc. You know the pitch.

You, as a fan, ought to know the pitch. Because you've seen it in actual practice right here in our miniature world of fandom.

Through fanzines, and through correspondence, you've come to know something about life in modern Belgium, the West Zone of Berlin, the steaming swamplands of Savannah, the decadent stews of Belfast. The doings of the London Circle, the affairs of the Melbourne Science Fiction Group, the latest mutterings from the Hermit of Hagerstown -- all are today a matter of available common knowledge.

An anthropologist, ethnologist, or sociologist of the future in search of data on our contemporary manners and *mores*, could do well to research a current offering of fan magazines. As exemplars of present-day attitudes in all categories -- geographical, chronological, financial -- they offer almost unlimited data.

And talk about "democracy in action"! The variety (and vehemence) of opinions expressed on every subject under the sun is perhaps unparalleled anywhere else today.

It is a curious -- and to me a sad-dening -- thing that in recent years most magazines and newspapers generally circulated have largely ceased to be real "organs of personal opinion". That is to say, they sel-

dom reflect any personal opinion save that of the editors and publishers. True, an angry letter, a crank document or a brief protest may find its place in the reader's columns—always balanced, you may have noticed, by other letters of high praise. But there is little opportunity offered for full-fledged, full-throttle controversial discussion.

Yet in our fanzines, pro meets con, constantly. And fan meets pro, and pros con fans, and fans attend cons, and pros write prose and -- well, you get the idea. Everything and anything goes: there may be twenty or more pages of letters or essay articles in addition to editorial opinion. Sometimes it's callow, sometimes it's rau-
cous, sometimes it's disjointed, sometimes it's vulgar -- but always it's a healthy phenomenon. And a surprisingly high percentage of what appears is a thoughtful effort to communicate and share viewpoints.

I hold no lofty beliefs in science fiction fanzines as leaders of the Literature of Protest. I would not presume to extrapolate to the point where I'd say that if everybody became a fan and started exchanging views with other fans, war would vanish from the earth and all of the ills of mankind, including Johnny Ray and athlete's foot, would be eliminated.

But I do presume to call your attention to the way in which our little minority-group manages to operate; to the way in which a hobby has brought about the kind of international good-will, cooperation,

and understanding which high-priced and high-pressure political propaganda, operating on generalized impersonal levels, has never been able to achieve.

It may well be that our diplomatic embassies all over the world should be required to stock current fanzines in their reception rooms: that, in place of white tie and tails, our ambassadors would be better off if they donned helicopter beanies.

ONE OF THE BEST ways to get into the swing of fanning is, of course, to join an amateur press group such as SAPS, OMPA, FAPA, or the NFFF. Now I don't have complete data on the first two organizations, and FAPA has a discouragingly long waiting-list of prospective members. But NFFF -- the old original -- is open for business. In fact, I've a long letter here from the president, Stan Woolston (1322 E. Fourth St., Santa Ana, California) who says, in part:

"NFFF has been quite active in the publishing field, with its official organ carrying a news program -- news of fanclubs and conventions, special projects, marriages and stuff of that nature" (what in the world does he mean by the last phrase?) "also information about publications, reviews of sf books and movies, etc.

"But the official organ isn't the only publication this year. There's a letterzine POSTIE, waiting for a new volunteer editor-publisher. TRADING BUREAU has an advertising zine called NFFF TRAD-

ER with Ray Schaffer, Jr., as editor-publisher. Other plans include a COMBOZINE MEMORY BOOK for the convention, which will be gathered-together special editions of the regular fanzines and some one-shots, all made up with an eye for retaining interest for rereading.

"This is just a summary of NFFF plans, and I see it doesn't include everything by a long ways. The YEARBOOK is far enough along that a couple of editors have volunteered for certain sections. One will be a fannish history, giving a news rundown of the past year, month by month. And there's lots more. Frankly, I hope you use some of this info in your column and that it will inspire some memberships. We especially want active members. All business is done by mail except at cons, and we'll have representatives there. South America, Australia, England, Scotland and Canada are represented. Dues, \$1.60 a year -- send them to NFFF Secretary-Treasurer Janie Lamb, Rt. 1, Heiskell, Tennessee."

So there you have the gist of it. If you want to contact other fans all over the world -- are interested in buying, selling, or trading sf books and magazines -- like to keep up with the latest news -- want to participate actively in writing or editing a fan publication -- just throw away your truss and join NFFF.

As long as we're putting in some free "commercials" this time around, here's one for those of you who follow the science fiction critics.

There are several whom I'd like

to follow myself, armed with a large club, but undoubtedly one of the best is Damon Knight.

He has just produced *IN SEARCH OF WONDER*, over 80,000 words of studied criticism of the best and worst in modern science fiction. And if you've ever read his analyses and reviews, you probably need no urging to send your \$4 to ADVENT PUBLISHERS, 3508 N. Sheffield Avenue, Chicago 13, Illinois.

Anyone interested in reviewing, writing for fanzines, or writing professional story material will undoubtedly benefit from a perusal of this work -- and the rest of you can read it for sheer enjoyment, then put it in a permanent place in your bookcase. It's merely a matter of shelf-preservation.

If you're looking for fanzine reviews, you might just as well skip along a little further, because right now I'm scheduled to deliver a short report on the 7th annual Midwestcon, which was held tightly, despite its screams and howls, in Cincinnati this May. As a matter of fact, I've just recently returned from the affair and am still in the process of drying out -- internally and externally. The spot chosen this year was a luxury motel in a shady section: in other words, a site for sore eyes. Among the attractions listed were free television in every room -- and air-conditioning to counter-act it. In addition, the motel boasted a large private swimming pool. Unfortunately, this seemed to be redundant, inasmuch as it rained during almost all of the weekend. I did

manage to get in for a dip on Friday afternoon, thus demonstrating to the amazed onlookers that I really have no objections to water -- if taken externally.

About 125 fans and pros gathered as guests of the Ohio group which sponsors this annual unofficial fan-gathering. Saturday night the group convened in nearby Sharonsville, at the most appropriate possible location -- Odd Fellows Hall. A number of films of past conventions were shown. On Sunday came the customary banquet. In between was a long, peripatetic party and gabfest; the sort of thing that has always made the Midwescon uniquely worthwhile.

All of this, of course, is being reported second-hand. I would have liked to participate, but somebody set up a poker-table and that was the end of the affair for me. A plain case of GOODBYE, MR. CHIPS.

Now it's about time we took off our shoes and started wading through the current fanzines.

Wet off the press is YANDRO (The Coulsons, 407½ E. 6th Street, North Manchester, Indiana: monthly: 10c) and as usual, the Hoosier Hot Shots are in full cry. Collectors will be interested in the article by Bob Tucker (I am not sure, of course, if there are any Tucker collectors, but I'm positive that garbage collectors still exist) which deals with a meeting of the University of Chicago Science Fiction group. Burton Spiller is represented by a prozine reprint and Robert Abernathy's clever Clevention speech is offered in the original Slavic. Jack

Daniels and Thomas Stratton round out an enjoyable issue.

FANTASY SAMPLER (John W. Murdock, 214 E. 11th St., Kansas City 6, Mo.: irreg., ½c per page) is a *rara avis* indeed -- a legible fanzine. Now I don't know how you feel about legibility, but as for me, I find legible things easier to read, particularly when it comes to perusing them. And FANTASY SAMPLER has gone in for a very startling innovation -- it is printed in *black* ink on *white* paper. This, I submit, is a daring experiment indeed, but the results are justified even if the margins are not.

Murdock offers a section devoted to the work of Clark Ashton Smith: a critical essay by Sam Sackett, a prose excerpt of Smith's work, and the first portion of a bibliography. In addition he presents a poem by H. P. Lovecraft. Fantasy-fans will want this issue.

While we're on the subject of readability, I might as well confess that there are a number of fanzines which will not be reviewed this time around for the simple reason that I just *couldn't* make the necessary eye-tracks. Now I'm well aware that fanzine publishing is a labor of love; but at the same time it is necessary to realize (as Ovid pointed out) that love is an art. And all too often, some of the fanzines which come in seem to be labors of puppy-love -- and a mongrel litter they are. I know, and most longtime fans know, that mimeography is messy and difficult when one works with inadequate equipment. Edit-

ing and assembling and stencilling and running off a fanzine is a long, intricate, and often painfully tedious chore. It is impossible to look at any fanzine without realizing how much sheer hard work went into its production.

But of what avail is all that work when it is impossible to look at any fanzine? By which I mean, why knock yourself out to put out a magazine which can't be read?

A jumble of elite type smudged at random across a page, with blank spots due to imperfect reproduction, is not inviting. When said type has not been properly edited -- i.e., broken up into short paragraphs, properly punctuated, and with spelling errors corrected -- the result is a discredit to both editor and author.

This is by no means a new gripe. Many articles have been written on just this subject, and many fans have howled in anguished reply -- reiterating that they are *not* trying to put out a professional magazine and are just publishing for fun.

But where's the fun when people can't read your efforts? And since when has "readable" become a synonym for "professional"?

It takes extra time, effort, and patience to produce a nice-looking job -- but it can be done. Dean Grennell's justly-famous GRUE has always been easy to scan (and hard to put down). Carole McKinney put out a flawless first issue of her fanzine a few years ago, using a piece of equipment which cost around \$35. Both of these fans rose quickly to prominent positions

as editors in the field -- attracting plenty of readers and lots of good material. I think that the pains they lavished on format were largely responsible for this result. Fans appreciate legibility. And contributors are much more apt to send their work to fanzines which will afford clear reproduction.

Sometimes, as is the case with most English fanzines (which are apparently printed by ants dipped in ink and trained to crawl across the pages and form letters) the content of a fanzine is so outstanding that one is willing to spend 36 hours or so just deciphering the wordage. But the neo-fan publisher or editor is advised to concentrate first and foremost on format and the laws of optics. I am by no means a purist when it comes to content, but I like a fanzine to look clean.

MORE LEGIBLE than the run of British offerings is a special edition of *THIS GOON FOR HIRE*, by John Berry (Chuck Harris: "Carolin", Lake Ave., Rainham, Essex, Eng.: no price, but beg, borrow or steal it somehow.) Mr. Berry is undoubtedly England's most prolific fan humorist, and if you want to know the reason for his popularity, this current offering is a good example.

Out of Nebraska comes the new ECLIPSE (Ray Thompson, 410 S. 4th St., Norfolk, Neb.: bi-monthly, 10c) and here is John Berry again, plus fanzine reviews, letters, Terry Carr's Face Critters, and an article by the irrepressible Wm. Deek. Mr. Deek bids fair to take over a pos-

ition in fandom which was at one time occupied by Richard Ellsberry (whose name I consistently misspelled). His sometimes vinDeek-tive remarks are always highly interesting -- and while I don't always find myself in agreement, it's good to see him devoting so much time and effort to a critical consideration of the field.

A very fancy format is offered by OUTRE (George Spencer, 8302 Donnybrook Lane, Chevy Chase 15, Md.: quarterly; 15c). Colors galore, but legible and well laid-out. Featured is a history of Canadian fanzine publishing by Wm. D. Grant -- and Wm. Deek again. This is certainly Deek Week around here! This time I find myself in almost complete disagreement with his thesis, but read him and form your own conclusions.

INSIDE is out (Ron Smith, 611 W. 114th St., New York 25, N. Y.: bi-monthly; 25c) and this May issue contains a history of its first ten years of publication. The 'zine was formerly called SCIENCE FICTION ADVERTISER, and when one includes publication under the present title, it has seen no less than 49 issues. Bob Silverberg does a fine summary of an honorable career. Lin Carter concludes his essay on bibliographic references in the works of H. P. Lovecraft, and there's a handy author index of material included in past issues of the magazine. There's also about 14 pages of filler by some guy who rants along about science-fiction movies, but it is merely an excuse to reproduce some of Pat Patterson's fanciful original

artwork.

It occurs to the conductor of this column (who is also the brakeman and engineer and thus responsible for the frequent derailing of a train of thought) that no mention has been made of FANTASY-TIMES. There's a reason for the omission.

FANTASY-TIMES (James Taurasi & Ray Van Houten, P. O. Box 2331, Paterson 23, N. J.: twice-a-month; 10c ea. or \$2 a year) isn't exactly a fanzine. It's labelled "The Science-Fiction Newspaper", and that's just what it really is. For fifteen years its columns have carried the latest dope from the latest dopesters, covering all phases of the professional field and including much fan-news as well. I've not mentioned it heretofore because by the time a review of a particular issue appears here it will be hopelessly out of date. Nevertheless, FANTASY-TIMES is thoroughly recommended to all fans who want to keep (if you'll pardon the expression) abreast of field.

The latest bundle from Britain, includes several choice recent items.

The big feature of this issue of ORION No. 15 (Paul Enever, 9 Churchill Ave., Hillingdon, Middlesex, England: bi-monthly, 50c a year) is a cartoon portfolio section by Arthur Thomson. Atom's impressions of British BNFs as BEMs are wonderful -- and ably demonstrate why he is regarded as the top Anglofan artist.

TRIODE (Eric Bentcliffe, 47 All-dis St., Greatmoor, Stockport, Cheshire, England: irreg., 15c) offers Julian Parr's report on the German

SF Con held in early spring, and a continuation of John Berry's **FUTURE HISTORY OF FANDOM**. Both good jobs, but naturally of greater interest to foreign fandom than to the *Americanisch-ers*.

On the other hand, A BAS (Boyd Raeburn 9, Glenvalley Drive, Toronto 9, Canada; bi-monthly, 25c) is definitely filled with items to intrigue people south of the borders -- of both Canada and sanity, that is. Issue No. 8 features a Pat Patterson cover and a groaning table of contents, including the latest installment of **DERELICT DEROGATION**. This series of imaginary dialogues between more or less real fans ranks right up there with the famous dialogues of Socrates (which, I admit, are all Greek to me).

SATA (Dan Adkins, PO Box 258, Luke AFB, Glendale, Arizona: irreg., 10c) offers a second issue notable for Guy Terwilleger's article on prozines of the past. Whether one accepts the writer's critical judgments or no, here is a comprehensive roundup of magazines which boomed and busted. Mr. Terwilleger's analysis of the busts qualifies him to do a job on Anita Ekberg and Jayne Mansfield. In which case I volunteer my assistance on the research end of the project. All he has to do is round up the subjects.

Here's the Annish of ISFA (Ed McNulty, 5645 N. Withrop St., Indianapolis, Ind.: quarterly: 15c) and it has a spectacular cover in color by Marvin Bryer. This is a fat issue, with plenty of features

and chances are you'll find something to your taste in these pages.

And if you want to make yourself some money, just send for the sixth issue of IT (Walter W. Lee, Jr., 9850 Yoakum Drive, Beverly Hills, Calif.: 50c). Since this final issue cost him 64c to produce, you'll be making 14c clear profit when you lay out half a buck.

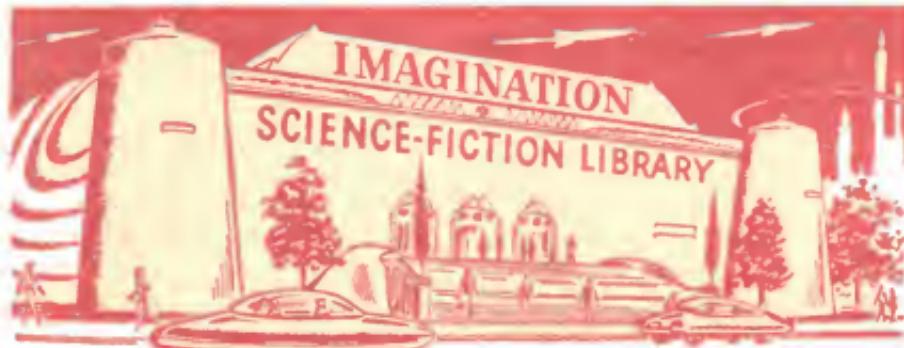
Admittedly, this is a higher price than one usually pays for a fanzine, but in the 88 pages of this supposedly final issue you'll find two items of special interest to two categories of fans -- motion picture *aficionados* and *Pogophiles*. The first is a lengthy, comprehensive, scholarly and utterly absorbing section on the cartoon films put out by UPA. Here's everything you might possibly want to know about nearsighted MR. MAGOO and his farsighted creators.

The POGO books are presented in synopsis-review form, and Lee approaches the subject tastefully and definitively.

As we slam the lid down on FANDORA'S BOX for another issue, word reaches me of the recent nuptials of fellow-columnist Rog Phillips and the aptly-named Honey Wood.

Rog Phillips is a fan after my own heart (usually with a knife) and Honey is justly esteemed for her fanactivity through the years -- indeed, her costume at the last convention did a lot to raise fanish morale. I'd like to take time out to extend both of them my personal congratulations and best wishes.

—Bob Block



— REVIEWING CURRENT SCIENCE FICTION BOOKS —

Conducted by Henry Bott

Hard cover science fiction is booming and many fine novels and anthologies are available at all bookstores or by writing direct to the publishers. Each month IMAGINATION will review one or more — candidly — as a guide to your book purchases.

THE DRAGON IN THE SEA

by Frank Herbert, \$2.95, 192 pages, Doubleday and Company, Inc., Garden City, New York.

Here is another superb example of what first-rate science-fiction can be!

Twenty-first century -- America at perpetual war with Pan-Asia. The four crewmen of the *Fenian Ram*, an atomic submarine, go into the North Atlantic towing a huge "cow" which will be filled with vital oil stolen from the undersea deposits of the enemy. Someone aboard the ship is an enemy agent and electronics officer Johnny Ramsey, a psychologist by profession, is also in the capacity of sleuth. These are commonplace materials and could easily have degenerated to an exercise in der-

ring-do. Instead a powerful novel emerges, finely written and impossible to put down.

Without belaboring the point, not only are the characterizations superb, but technologically the concepts are right, and the aura of suspense and horror — incipient with promised doom — never leaves. I cannot be too enthusiastic about this story and I recommend it without reservation.

I'm unfamiliar with anything else of Herbert's but if he doesn't soon come up with another piece like this, I'll be surprised and disappointed.

After a second reading, I find myself just as excited about the novel. Run and get it!

★ ★ ★



Letters



from the Readers

TOP LEAD NOVELS

Dear Bill:

I've just finished reading **FOR EVER WE DIE** in the August *Madge*. Like **BATTLE FOR THE STARS** in the June issue, it was an excellent lead novel, and I'm sure looking forward to more.

But, I have one gripe about the August issue. That is Terry. He is the worst artist you feature and here he is doing the cover and most of the interiors! Nine out of ten of his illos stink and tend to make *Madge* look cheap. Let's have less of him and more of artists like Freas.

Another thing, now that Bob Bloch has taken over **FANDORA'S BOX** I think the title for the fan column should be changed.

I must thank you for returning to the white band under the title on the cover. And, of course, for the good lead novels in not only *Madge* but **IMAGINATIVE TALES** as well. Two good magazines!

Michael R. Krakomberger
183 East St.

Buffalo 7, N. Y.
*You're sure giving Bill Terry a rough time, Mike! What did you have against his cover on the issue? We thought it was pretty darn good! Glad you like the stories in *MADGE*. More good ones on the way . . . Change the title of the fan column? To what? . . . wh*

OUR HAIRY BEM

Dear Bill Hamling:

Congratulations! You've recently picked up a new reader -- me. The cover on the August issue first attracted me. It was a real eye-catcher all right.

FOREVER WE DIE was one of the best s-f stories I've read in a long time. However, I didn't think too much of **THE MAN WITH THE GOLDEN EYES** although it started out to be interesting. The ending was a big disappointment.

The two-color illustrations are met with favor, as are the cartoons. But one question: what is that burly looking thing in the cartoons drawn by Scheffy?

Lloyd Cary
239 Marion St.
Toledo 9, Ohio

That 'burly' thing is our very popular "Hairy BEM" and is becoming quite an institution. We feature "it" in both MADGE and IMAGINATIVE TALES. -- So what's a BEM? Bug-Eyed-Monster, natch. You'd get bug-eyed too if you ever made personal contact! wlh

NOT HIS MEAT

Dear Mr. Hamling:

For years I've been hearing about how wonderful science fiction is. Many people have prompted me to "buy it". They said it was "adult" and "thought provoking" not to mention "informative" and "entertaining". I couldn't believe this. To me it looked like trash. So I ignored the appeals. But my friends persisted. So, finally, I gave in.

Last week I got a copy of the August issue of your magazine. The cover was appalling. I've seen better on comic-books. But I bought it anyway.

I suffered through every story, article, and cartoon in your rag. When I had finished I decided that the cover was, after all, quite appropriate. Your magazine is nothing more than a comic-book without pictures. I must assume that I was right after all. Science fiction is trash. Either that or I have merely chosen a bad example.

Of course, I don't expect you to inform me that the latter suggestion is true. It's quite clear that you have only the highest regard for your magazine. I also noticed that all the letters in your reader

section repeat your fantastic delusion. You're living in a dream world, and it's a rather shallow one at that. I don't mind people reading science fiction (any more than I mind those who read "True Confessions") but I do object to this pretense that science fiction is a high form of literature. It isn't!

Your readers aren't capable of anything above Thomas B. Costain and Frank Yerbe and your authors are of that level or lower, which is trash.

You people are too lazy or too dense to improve yourselves with profound literature so instead you pretend that the trash you do read is profound. Take a look at Defoe, Joyce, Hemmingway, Faulkner, etc. And see what "mature" literature really is. In the meantime, why don't you science fiction people cut the bull!

Sol Duncan
4480 Haste St.
Berkeley, Cal.

One would assume that your first science fiction purchase would be your last. We do not believe this is the case, however. You'll buy this issue of IMAGINATION simply because we printed your letter. Why? Because your letter indicates to us you're an intellectual snob. If we're as big a bunch of boobs as you intimate, then the "friends" or other people you know who recommended science fiction to you are also boobs. Obviously a person of your high tastes should not associate with boobs. How many of your friends have you checked off because they read science fiction? While we don't know them (obvious-

ly people of discerning tastes) they may actually have been trying to do you a favor -- draw you down from the ivory tower and have some reading entertainment for a change. Nobody in science fiction (least of all us, and we've been reading, writing, and editing in the field for twenty years!) asserts that science fiction, *per se*, is a literary "art". We could, of course, point to many writers and stories ranking on the "classic" shelf. But we won't since we don't have to "prove" that science fiction is not trash. You mention a few writers we should take a look at. We have. They're fine. Hemingway in particular. Matter of fact, for our dough the only really entertaining writer of the four you mentioned is "Papa". Seems to us you should actually have included him in the "trash" category you relegate Costain and Yerbe to. Here you again show all the earmarks of a snob. Both Costain and Yerbe are excellent story-tellers, good writers, and they satisfy the tastes of a good many hard cover readers. A hell of a lot more than you could include in your rarified sanctorum. Come down out of the clouds, pal. You're checking with literary stagnation!

..... wlh

A MUST FOR THE FAIR SEX

Dear Mr. Hamling:

Thought your lead novel in the August issue of *Madge* was excellent. C. H. Thames' FOREVER WE DIE kept me interested right to the last line. Since I am a woman and my powers of concentration are not too strong, I congratulate

Thames on holding my attention. Also the short, WE RUN FROM THE HUNTED. I thought this was the best story of its type so far. But the best short in the issue was NEXT STOP, NOWHERE. I haven't been so amused in a long time. Would like to read some more shorts by Dick Purcell.

If I didn't like the stories *Madge* prints I would still subscribe to it for one reason. The first thing I turn to when I get my new issue is Scheffy's cartoon about the hairy monster. He (the monster!) is terrific and as cute as a monster could be!

To sum it all up, I think every gal should read *Madge*.

Mrs. Coline Newton
330 N. Folsom
Coquille, Ore.

We'll second that motion . . . But what's this about a woman not having strong power of concentration? Never met a gal yet who couldn't get a guy squirming by sticking to her point! In our book the ladies take no backseat on concentration. Amen wlh

BLAST AT THE GALS . . .

Dear Bill Hamling:

Apparently the insidious infiltration of the females is hitting dear old *Madge* with even more ferocity than the other mags. Of course, *Madge* is quite a gal herself, and probably likes to associate with her own kind. As for us poor males, I guess we'll just have to bear with 'em.

Five out of eleven letters in the latest issue were from dames. I'm broadminded, and I never begrudging

space for one or even two letters from exceptionally informed sci-fi fem-fans, but aren't you going a little too far? It would be different if they really had something to say, but you could easily sign four or five names to the same letter and not affect things in the least.

The average fem epistle seems to comprise: "Gee, I'm a girl, an' I just love that nice science fiction magazine of yours! It's the greatest thing that's happened to women since men! P. S., I'm pretty and young." (And obviously haven't heard of lonely hearts clubs where, I'm told, the response is much more gratifying and the results rather more interesting.)

Not that I'm just trying to run women down; personally I love 'em. But if a woman hasn't anything more to say than "your mag is tops!" I can't see publishing their letters just to encourage more drivel of the same nature. And that goes for the same kind of tripe written by men.

I'll always like stories by female authors like Leigh Brackett, and I'll not condemn letters by gals like Janice Jacobson who at least seems to have actually read the mag. But housewives can't comprise *all* your readership, so please, *don't let them coast!* Make 'em either say something, or keep out.

Walt Hassett
67 Bevier St.

Binghampton, N. Y.

Keep an eye on your mailbox, Walt, old chap. Methinks you'll be having a few arsenic-tinted envelopes winging your way after the gals read your letter here. Well, pal if you're still around come next issue, drop



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PIONEER, HE SAYS

Dear wh:

Today I went down to the local magazine shop and had the pleasant discovery of finding the August issue of *Madge* on sale. I bought it with a high degree of pleasure -- which was somewhat dimmed when I turned to the letter section and read the rude blasting of *Madge* by one John Fox.

Sure, it's Mr. Fox's privilege to voice his opinion however crude. But it's also my privilege to blast back at him. So I will.

So *Madge* isn't on top of the pile, is it? Perhaps. But it's a long way from the bottom! Strike one for Fox.

A quote from Fox's letter: "You should live so long as to have their fine writers, illustrators, and letter columns." In the first place, *Madge* has a finer staff, finer writers, and a finer outlook than *Startling Stories* or *Thrilling Wonder Stories* ever had -- or ever hoped to have! Secondly, *Madge* will be around and improve come hell or high water! Strike two for Fox.

And then there's Mr. Fox saying that what you call it doesn't make it what it is. I agree. But I think that relating that to *Madge* is positively, absolutely, irrevocably the last straw. The only reason you see praise in *Madge's* letters section is because readers think the magazine deserves it. With minor exceptions. Mr. Fox, for example. So strike three for Fox. And out.

Oh yes, Fox said: " -- kiss this

customer goodbye." Come now, Foxie, I wouldn't make my worst enemy do that!

To close this letter I'd like to say that IMAGINATION doesn't deserve any more blasting than a pioneer would. And I'd like to hear someone say that *Madge* isn't a pioneer of sorts.

Kenneth Tidwell
270 Lamesa
Austin 4, Texas

Next batter! with

SHAPE OF ALIEN LIFE

Dear Mr Hamling:

After reading *Madge* recently, and always on the lookout for a new astronomical fact or concept, a recent Portland, Oregon interview with Dr. Harlow Shapley came to mind. I quote him:

1. Astronomers believe intelligent beings live on thousands of planets. There isn't a chance in a million that any of them look like earthly human beings, though some may be more intelligent.

2. Conditions like those on Earth should be found at least 100 million times in the known universe.

3. Man is one of more than a million kinds of creatures on the Earth. There was abundant life on Earth for a billion years before man appeared.

4. There are more than 800,000 kinds of insects. There are so many kinds of animal life that there is hardly a chance statistically that any of the creatures on other planets would look like us, or even like any of the mammals.

5. There is little likelihood of high forms of life elsewhere in the

solar system. There is a bare chance that some form of life may exist on Venus; the other planets are too hot or too cold. Life will be found only on planets the right distance from their suns (to have liquids such as water).

I have only one point to make on these observations by a noted astronomer. When Dr. Shapley began the interview he began: "Astronomers believe . . ." He should have prefaced it with "some", "many", or "most". I certainly do not believe all astronomers share his cautious opinions.

Alex Saunders
17 Mackay Ave.

Toronto 10, Ont., Canada
Either do we . . . On to Mars! . . . Which about winds up shop for this month, except to remind you about our new feature, COSMIC PEN-CLUB which you'll find full details on in the editorial on page 6. Get your listing in as soon as possible, as we will run them on a first-come and first-served basis . . . Also, do us a favor and turn the page and fill out a subscription coupon. Take your pick of the free books offered -- or all of them if you wish! Don't delay, do it today. We'll be back again next issue. See you then with

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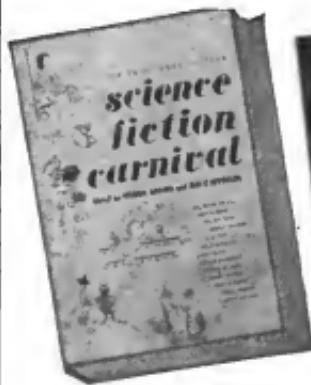
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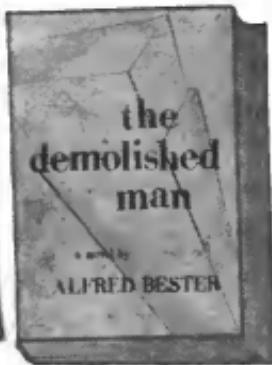
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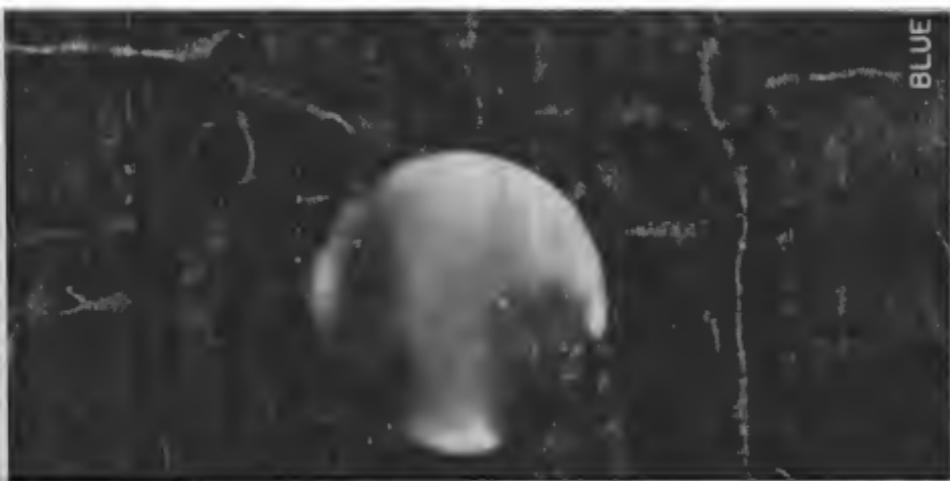
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